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# THE SHADOW OF A LIFE

BY

BERYL HOPE

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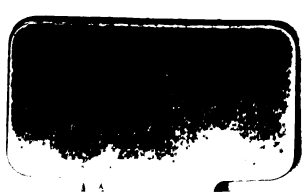

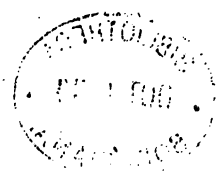

THE

# SHADOW OF A LIFE:

## A Girl's Story.

BY

BERYL HOPE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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THE

# SHADOW OF A LIFE.

## CHAPTER I.

### ETHEL BLANTYRE'S PICTURE.

"'Oh, dark-eyed maid,'
The soldier said,
'I 've been wounded in many a fray,
But such a dart
As you shoot to my heart
I never felt till to-day.'"

*Gerald Massey.*

It was on the 1st of September that I was to enter upon my new office. As the time approached, I no longer shrank from it as I had once done. On the contrary, I hailed its advent as a happy release from the home round which many painful thoughts had already begun to cling. Since that day in which I had

discovered the secret of my father's visits to Milford my mind had undergone a change. I now saw that it was better for me to go. I should at least have the satisfaction of knowing that I was assisting my parents instead of being a burden upon them ; for it was a revelation to me that Lady Constance had actually paid for our education. Edmund had once darkly hinted at it, when he was in a more confidential mood than usual, and I had repudiated the idea as an absurdity. And yet it was so. That my father should have so far humiliated himself I could now unfortunately understand, but that my mother should also have consented to such an obligation was incomprehensible. Henceforward I hoped to put myself beyond the pale of such acts of generosity, and to be independent of them.

With such thoughts in my mind, I bade farewell to my family upon that bright September afternoon. The young gnats were chasing each other in the sunshine. Chill mists were

already creeping round the horizon, which would soon wrap the earth in a mantle of dewy vapour, but its present aspect was gorgeous in all the beauty of the late summer-time. Refusing my father's offer of accompanying me to the Wentworth Station, I set out on my short journey alone, dressing myself as plainly as possible in order that I might bear out my character as governess.

I wondered whether it was likely that any one should meet me upon my arrival. I did not wish for company; and it was, therefore, with feelings of relief that I saw an empty pony-carriage standing in the station-yard, which evidently belonged to the Court. I stepped down to the platform, and walked the whole length of the train in search of the van which contained my luggage, when running footsteps behind me caused me to turn round and confront a servant in livery. He touched his hat, and inquired if I was the young lady who was expected, and to my answer in the

affirmative he undertook the responsibility of looking after my trunks. "One black box, one covered in canvas, a bonnet-box, and a dressing-case," I indicated, "and this bundle of shawls and umbrellas," and then I walked towards the carriage. A minute more, and the panting engine was on its way, leaving me as the one solitary passenger for Wentworth. The servants were placing my trunks upon a little cart as I stepped into the carriage, and with dreamy eyes I held the reins mechanically in my hands till the task should be accomplished. At this moment a horse and its rider dashed into the station-yard, and I at once saw in the pleased smile of recognition the good-tempered face of Captain Douglas. I blushed nervously. I did not know what to say, or what should be my proper deportment as the governess in his brother's family. I therefore bowed stiffly in acknowledgment of his presence.

"Your train is more punctual than is usually the case," he said, reining in his steed sud-

denly and looking at his watch as he spoke. "'Pon my word, though, I'm later than I thought. How are you, Miss Hamilton? been all right since we met last?"

"Perfectly well, thank you," I replied demurely. "I hope Mrs. Douglas and the children are quite well?"

"Yes, thanks; I believe so. Is that your luggage they're hauling up there?"

"Yes."

"They're awfully slow about it. You're not cold, I hope?"

For a slight, involuntary shiver passed over me, more from nervousness than from actual cold, but I answered steadily:

"No, not at all, thank you; though the evenings begin to be chilly now."

"Yes, they do. I'll tell you what—we won't wait for those fellows. I'll drive you on, and James can have my horse. Here, James!" he shouted, "take this brute. I will drive the ponies, and you can follow us."

"All right, Sir," answered the man, as Captain Douglas delivered over the animal to his care and sprang into the carriage. I felt more embarrassed than ever. I had no qualms about the incorrectness of such a proceeding, for Captain Douglas would not have hesitated to drive his mother's maid through the town if it had suited his purpose to do so, and, of course, I was but little more than a lady's maid in his opinion; but I felt that it behoved me to treat him as befitted my position, and how to do this I hardly knew. I found, however, that if I answered his questions it would be sufficient to sustain the conversation, for he had plenty to say without listening to my feeble remarks. He asked numerous questions about Lady Constance, to which, fortunately, I was able to reply without betraying any of the mental discomposure which the mention of her name caused me. He told me of the last scrape which he and his small nieces had fallen into, and at last succeeded in making me

laugh and talk naturally, as, no doubt, had been his intention.

We were coming up the drive now, and it was necessary to preserve a certain amount of decorum. I sat very still, looking straight before me, as we wound through the clump of trees whose tops were gilded with the setting sun. I was not unhappy; on the contrary, I was feeling very contented and thankful, but I had not fallen into my place yet, and knew not what was expected of me. Captain Douglas looked at me as we approached the house, as if the sudden silence which had fallen upon me surprised him.

"Miss Hamilton," he said gently, "I hope you will excuse me, but—you 're not fretting about coming here, are you?"

"Oh, no," I answered warmly; "not at all. Only, I don't know anyone yet. Naturally I feel a little nervous."

"Well, then, the best way to overcome that is to begin to know us all as fast as you can."

"Thank you," I said, with a little bow.

"You 'll not have much difficulty, I should imagine, for we 're none of us very deep. Besides, you do know me already."

"Not very well," I said faintly.

"Oh, well, you know me 'some,' as the Americans say. I hardly expect you to know me 'all' just yet."

"No," I said again, in the same monotonous voice.

"And promise me one thing, please. You 're going to make yourself happy here, ain't you?"

"I hope so."

"I hope so too. Now here we are at the door, and you must take care how you get down. Are you on terra firma?"

"Yes, thank you."

That was all we said. He shook hands with me, drove the ponies round to the stable, and I was left to the care of the butler, who now ushered me into the presence of Mrs. Douglas. She was sitting in the drawing-room alone, and

smiled her pretty shy smile as she shook hands with me, and suggested my going to my room at once. "I will send you a cup of tea," she said kindly, "and I hope that you will ask for anything which you may require."

This was reassuring. I walked down the long passage and up the beautiful staircase with a hopeful heart, and was shown into my pretty blue bedroom by the same person whom I had before seen. She preceded me with a grim smile, kindly inquiring what she could do for me. But, in truth, there was nothing that I could perceive wanting. My trunks were unstrapped, and were now standing ready for the keys with which Burton volunteered to unlock them. Thanking her for her kindness, but not knowing how far I might presume upon it, I told her that I would attend to myself and not trouble her any farther. I was quite unused to luxury at home, and although I dearly liked to be waited upon I was not sure that I was doing right in permitting it.

"You may bring me a cup of tea, please," I said at length, finding that she was fussily determined to be kind; "and afterwards I will unpack quietly." It was very pleasant, however, to find everyone so willing to help me, even the servants showing a respect which had been far from my anticipations. By the time that Burton had returned with the tea I was upon my knees before the open trunk, quickly conveying its contents to the floor and chairs which were already strewed with clothes.

"Dear me, Miss," said the woman; "let me do that for you. I don't like to see you tiring yourself upon the very first evening as you've come into the house; and there's company, too, to dinner, so you must keep yourself fresh and well."

I took the tea from her hand, and suffered her to have her way, leaning back in the tiny arm-chair which had been placed at my disposal, while I made a pretence of eating my wafer of bread and butter.

"Did you say there was company?" I asked. I had not expected to have my dinner with the family in this way, but supposed that it was an exception in favour of my fresh arrival. "Do you think Mrs. Douglas expects me to go down to dinner?"

"Oh, yes, Miss," answered Burton, with familiar loquacity, "to be sure she does. You won't find this like some houses, Miss, where the family 's proud and stuck-up like. There was never nothing like that about Miss Amy, and I 've known her from a child, bless her heart! When first there was a talk of your coming, she said to me, 'Now, Burton, remember as you are to see after her. She isn't like a common governess'" (here I flushed crimson), "'and her Pa is a real gentleman and a friend of Lady Constance's. You must see that she has all she wants, and is just like a visitor in the 'ouse'; and so I said I would, Miss."

My heart was almost too full for words. To be treated as a visitor where I was only a

dependent was far above any anticipations which I could have had. I almost feared—indeed, I knew too well—that it was Lady Constance herself whom I had to thank for it.

"But I thought you were the housekeeper?" I asked. "It is very, very kind of Mrs. Douglas, but are you quite sure that you have time to attend to me in this way? If there is company to-night, for instance, must you not go downstairs and see after the servants?"

"No, Miss, it ain't necessary to do that at all. They all knows their work, and have lived here as long as I have. The Cook 's a first-rate one, and has plenty under her to do what she tells 'em. I 'm only sort of a general 'superveyor' in the 'ouse, and give out the stores, and see to the linen, and takes the general management. Then my work 's done, and I can do as I like. Mrs. Douglas was never a very hard mistress to no one, and therefore, when I heard you was coming, I said

to myself, 'That young lady shall have me to look after her.'"

"It was really very good of you," I said gratefully, "but, indeed, it is quite unnecessary; I am accustomed to waiting upon myself, and therefore it is no trouble to me to do so."

"Well, then, you oughtn't to, Miss, such a young lady as you are. I always feel sorry, myself, when I see a young lady having to go out and earn her living as you 're doing."

I winced under this familiarly kind interest.

"You are mistaken," I said; "it was not quite necessary for me to go out on that account. I did it of my own accord, partly to please my father, partly to please myself. I doubt if I should have gone anywhere but to Mrs. Douglas."

"Yes, I understand," said Burton, "your Pa 's a great friend of Lady Constance Milford's, ain't he? and Mrs. Douglas is her cousin by marriage. That 's how it came about, I suppose."

She jerked down the white muslin dress which she held in her hand suddenly, while my fears arose as to the condition of those goffered frills of which I had been so careful before I started.

"Yes," I said uneasily, partly in fear of the consequences to my much-prized dress, partly because I dreaded the terrible secret of which, so far as I knew, only I was in possession. "Yes, we are friends of Lady Constance's. It was through her that I heard of Mrs. Douglas." I longed to say that I had known a niece of Mrs. Douglas also, but I did not wish to appear snobbish, and it was hardly necessary to name all my acquaintance to the housekeeper.

"What a sweet lady she is!" said Burton again, now moving off to a chest of drawers in which she prepared to stow my possessions.

"Yes," I replied faintly. I did not wish to discuss her, or to allow anyone to guess the state of my feelings towards her. "Yes," I repeated, "she is very kind."

"Have you known her long?" asked Burton, continuing her work upon my linen. "Have you known her ever since she lived in Halton?"

"No," I replied boldly. "I have been at school till lately. My father has known the family for several years."

The faintest shadow of a smile passed over Burton's demure face.

"Yes, so I 've heard," she muttered in a tone which was scarcely audible.

In an instant my suspicions were aroused. Could she have heard any rumour concerning that which I had so much dreaded? My heart beat quickly, and I saw that the cup which I held trembled in my hand. I could not rest in this way; I must know more, come what might.

"How do you know, Mrs. Burton?" I asked, steadying my voice to its natural tone. "Do you know my father? has he ever been here?"

"Oh dear, yes, Miss, I've known him for years," she answered glibly. "He was the doctor at Halton before ever I came here, and attended at this house once when there was a consultation. A tall gentleman he is, very good-looking."

"Yes, he is," I replied; but such an answer did not satisfy me. She could not know much of my father if she had only seen him once. "Is that the only time you have seen him?" I inquired again.

"No, Miss; I've seen him often, almost every time I go into Halton."

"So you do go into Halton," I thought uneasily, wondering whether in that nest of gossips she had heard more of our family concerns than she ought to have done. But this was a subject upon which I could not question her, and it was as well not to betray any curiosity upon it. I put down my cup with a jingling noise, and jumped up hastily from my comfortable position. "Let me help you," I

said; "I really can't sit here, and allow you to do all the work."

"It 's no trouble, Miss," she answered, though she permitted me by this time to put the different articles into their places. "What will you wear to-night, Miss? we might as well put it out ready at once."

"I think I will put on my white muslin, thank you, if you say that there is company. But I hope it is not a large party, Burton?"

"Oh dear, no, Miss? Only them that 's in the house. I only meant that they wasn't alone as they so often are. There 's only Lady Barthwick, that 's Mr. Douglas' mother, and Mr. Milford, who maybe you 've seen before."

"Is that all?" I asked, relieved.

"Yes. Oh, perhaps there 's the Captain. He comes in pretty often; his regiment 's here, and he can call very handy. Such a fine gentleman he is, too; don't you think so, Miss?"

"Yes," I answered absently. I was think-

ing of my dress, and the few accompaniments to it which I had as ornaments.

"I don't know what there is about him," continued Burton, "that makes everyone like him so much. I think it is because he is so good-tempered, never a frown on his face, or a murmur to be heard out of his lips. He 's the only one Miss Blantyre took a fancy to, or I' m mistaken," she added confidentially, "and I 'm sure I wish he would take a fancy to her."

"Who is Miss Blantyre?" I asked with interest.

"Law, Miss, have you never heard of Miss Blantyre?" asked Burton, pausing from her occupation, and looking at me with astonishment depicted in her countenance. I began to wonder whether she was a public character about my ignorance of whom I ought to be much ashamed, but nevertheless I had to confess it. "I never heard of her," I said boldly.

"She is Mrs. Douglas' sister, the loveliest young lady you ever set eyes on, and all the

gentlemen go fairly crazy about her. I was her nurse; went to her after I left Lady Barthwick, for I 've lived in both sides of the family you know, Miss. I was first maid to Miss Douglas, and then, after a good many years, I went to live at Major Blantyre's, when Miss Ethel was only two years old. She was a lovely little fairy of a thing, even then, and all the gentlemen used to talk to her, and tell her that they 'd marry her, which of course they couldn't—not all of 'em. Then when she grew up she was that beautiful that all the county was talking of her, and she went up to London and got presented to Her Majesty, and they do say that the Queen was so pleased with her that she could not take her eyes off her."

"Really?" I said, feeling my interest now quite aroused. "I should like to see this very beautiful young lady."

"Well, perhaps she 'll come here some day," said Burton; "but I hear she has been breaking off another engagement — only that 's a

secret," she put in, lowering her voice. "I wonder often whether she 's unhappy about it. Ah ! it 's her own fault—she ought to have married the Captain, and so I always said. She 'd have liked him better than anyone else."

"And do you think he would have liked her, Burton, because perhaps that is more to the point ?"

"Law, bless you, yes, Miss ; he couldn't have helped it. Why, she can turn anyone round her little finger, and he 's mortal as well as the rest of 'em. I believe he proposed to her, like the others, but she never told me about it."

"I should think not !" I ejaculated inwardly, much amused at Burton's interest in the subject. If she told all strangers Miss Blantyre's secrets in the same manner that she was telling me, I could not be surprised at that young lady withholding some of her confidence.

"How is it that she is not married ?" I asked at length.

"Because there 's too many wanting her, I

believe," said Burton. "She has been engaged eight or nine times, to my knowledge."

"Dear me," I said, my curiosity now fairly aroused; "you make me feel quite anxious to see her. I don't know that I ever met anyone in my life that had been engaged so often."

"You can see her picture downstairs," said Burton, "upon the drawing-room table. Mrs. Douglas has several, but there's one there better than any of the others."

"I shall be sure to look out for it," I said, beginning to be rather weary of this woman's loquacity. "And now, Burton, I really must not keep you any more. I will ring for you again when I want anything done—that is, if you are sure Mrs. Douglas expects me to."

Having strenuously asserted that such was the case, and making assurance doubly sure by the statement that "Mrs. Douglas would be quite annoyed if I did not ring for her," Burton took her departure, and I was left to

smile over her gossip, which, I must confess, amused me considerably. I had only just entered the house and had already been made the recipient of the most delicate confidences. I wondered what Miss Blantyre would say if she knew of it, what Captain Douglas would say if he thought that "the new governess" had been discussing his prospects in this manner with the housekeeper. I continued my arrangements alone, till I had made my room as snug and comfortable as if I had been in it for months, and then I wrote a few lines to my mother, announcing my arrival. By the time this was done I found that I must dress for dinner, and had only just completed my toilet when the gong sounded. I came downstairs in slight trepidation to find that I was alone in the drawing-room, and had time to survey myself in the long pier-glass, greatly to my own satisfaction. A few minutes more, and the family had arrived upon the scene. I was introduced to Lady Barthwick, who, I discovered,

was the Countess of Brantford's sister, a kind motherly-faced woman, with the same silvery hair that Lady Brantford had. She had a cheerful, bright voice in speaking, a voice which brought comfort in its tone, and which had a decisiveness in its utterance that one felt to be reliable. I liked to hear her natural hearty laugh, and the motherly manner in which she addressed her sons. For Captain Douglas was there, according to Burton's predictions, and took me in to dinner, Mr. Milford having charge of Mrs. Douglas. Conversation was kept up in a bright sparkling manner, although much of it being of a personal nature, I was debarred from joining in it; but by the time I had finished dinner I felt that I was already beginning to see the characters of those with whom I was to live, and to feel at home with them. I wondered what Mr. Milford thought of me, whether he remembered the day in which I had behaved in so strange a manner towards him, by rejecting his kindness

and speaking so brusquely. But he was on the other side of the table, and I did not venture to utter more than a monosyllable across that expanse of glittering silver and glass, and arrangements of bright flowers. When we entered the drawing-room again, we drew our chairs up before the fire, at Mrs. Douglas' request, for the evening was chilly, in spite of the brilliant sunshine which we had had all day. I sat opposite to the flickering light, which rose and fell fitfully before it burst into a flame ; my white frills swept the ground beside me as I leaned over to look at a book of photographs which Mrs. Douglas had given me to amuse me. "Shall I find the lovely Ethel here?" I thought, as I turned the pages one by one, anxious to see whether I should recognise her. Yes; there she must be! No one else, surely, could realise the description which her nurse had given me—a girl, not unlike Mrs. Douglas, but younger-looking and with a more thoughtful face, and singularly

beautiful. She was dressed in white, but an Indian shawl which was thrown round her shoulders, though its brilliant colours were lost in the photograph, relieved by its broad dark stripes the monotony of the picture. She wore a coquettish little hat, from under which she glanced with an expressive look as she leaned against a stile and supported herself by the arm which was thrown backward over it. Her two feet were crossed, and her whole attitude was one of expectation, as the head was slightly turned towards the observer. I gazed at it for some minutes, then asked of Mrs. Douglas whose photograph it was.

"It is my sister Ethel," she said; "Ethel Blantyre."

"Indeed? She must be very beautiful."

"Yes, she is," said Lady Barthwick; "too beautiful, I am afraid."

"In what way?" I asked timidly.

"I think such beauty is apt to be dangerous," she answered evasively; then, as if

fearful that she should give a wrong impression, added, "She is a very charming girl."

"Too charming," said Mrs. Douglas, archly, echoing her words.

Lady Barthwick laughed.

"Well, perhaps she is too charming. She certainly has too many admirers."

"For her own comfort, I should think," said Mrs. Douglas; "for I do not believe that Ethel cares for anyone, or ever will do so, in spite of her fascinating manners."

I felt much interested in this girl whose beauty and fascination were so attractive, and longed to know her. The sight of a pretty face had always had a great charm for me, especially when it was coupled with a pleasing deportment. I was still sitting with the album open on my lap when the gentlemen came in from the dining-room, and Captain Douglas, advancing towards the hearth-rug by which I was seated, volunteered to place my coffee-cup on a side table. As he did so, he also

caught sight of the fair face, and came back to it.

"What do you think of that?" he said, indicating the "that" by a movement of his forefinger; "very jolly, isn't she?" He spoke in a lower tone than usual, as if the remark was intended for my ear solely, and I answered in the same voice, "I think it is one of the most beautiful faces I have ever seen." "Umph!" was all his remark as he walked away again, and which left me as blindly in the dark as to his real thought as he possibly intended me to be. In another moment he was discussing the probability of Sir Steele Cutler's election as Member for the county, and the fair face appeared to have vanished from his recollection.

"Shall we have a game of whist?" proposed Mrs. Douglas, taking out the cards and shuffling them. "Claude, you must help me to pay off old scores—unless you play, Miss Hamilton." She turned to me apologetically.

"No, thank you," I replied; "I would much rather not," and, taking my work out of its little basket, I began some flimsy construction which was destined to be a collar for my mother. Mr. Milford came and sat down beside me, entering into conversation in his quiet voice, which reminded me so forcibly of his brother that it almost sent a pain to my heart, and brought back other memories which I would fain have put from me. But it was very pleasant to be on these terms with him, to be treated as a friend, in spite of the position which I held in the house, but which everyone was so kindly ignoring. I began to feel as if I were at home, to forget the circumstances which surrounded me, and the cloud through which I could not penetrate. Mr. Milford's gentleness soothed and calmed my impetuous spirit like the voice of a person soothing a wayward child; and when at length I said good-night to Mrs. Douglas at the threshold of my own door, I thanked her gratefully for

the welcome she had given me, and begged her to tell me whatever she desired. "For I am very young," I said humbly, "and do not quite know what I ought to do. But I am anxious to please you, and should be so grateful for any instructions." Then this dear little creature put up her pretty mouth and kissed me—me—her governess! And so this first evening at Wentworth Court passed away.

## CHAPTER II.

### A BLACKBERRY TREAT.

"He was a Prince with golden hair
(In a palace beside the sea),
And I but a poor mermaiden,
And how should he care for me?"

*Owen Meredith.*

It did not take long to settle down into my new life. I was treated with every possible mark of consideration, as if I were in truth the friend of the household rather than the governess whose mission it was to teach the children and receive payment for it. Wentworth Court soon became more like my own home than the old house at Halton, and though

I blamed myself often for liking it better, I could not help acknowledging the fact. Of course I had my trials, as one has everywhere. Occasionally I had letters from home which ruffled me, sometimes my own nature asserted itself, and I was inclined to be wayward, and too easily put out by small circumstances, which had always been my wont. But these were rare occurrences now compared with the old days of petulancy and mortification. A new life was dawning upon me, a life which, as yet, was unacknowledged, but which began to pervade my being with a glow of happiness which hitherto had been unknown.

I had seen a great deal of Captain Douglas by this time, in natural and frequent intercourse, and though no thought of the future had disturbed my mind, I could not help the consciousness that his presence gave me pleasure, as his absence too often caused ennui and listlessness. I thought I was schooling my heart against this, for I had enough occupation

to keep me from idle dreams which could have but one awakening. I was constantly with the children, whose prattle gave me food for other imaginations, and yet too often my mind would wander back to the last conversation which I had had with him, the last look, the last tone in which he had paid me a compliment, or reproved me with playful banter. I am afraid that I flirted almost as much as he did, for the freedom with which he treated me called forth freedom on my part, and we were now so constantly thrown together that we had become quite intimate. I had no longer fears as to my deportment, and believed that he understood my conduct as well as I understood his, and that no harm could come of it.

I was sitting one day about six weeks after my arrival, in the solitude of my own room, perusing two letters from my mother and Mildred, which had just been brought in by the mid-day post. They had been handed to me at luncheon, and I had reserved them as a

*bonne bouche*, to read afterwards, keeping them beside my plate, and glancing at them lovingly from time to time, while conjecturing what their contents might be. Mrs. Douglas' prattling voice had kept up a running conversation throughout the children's dinner. It was like a little brook, bright, sparkling, and lively, for this dear little woman never seemed to take life in the same manner as other people, and I often envied her power of enjoyment and sunny disposition. She dashed over little annoyances like water dashing over the pebbles in a stream, or passed over the vexations which to some women are constant pools of eddying foam in ripples of clear laughter which gradually vanished into calm. Her children seemed all pleasure and no care ; possibly because the care might have been divided between the nurse and me. She did not see very much of them, for after their morning walk they had an hour's lessons, and then played in the nursery, or learnt to make cross-stitch

mats or to hem towels. Sometimes they were troublesome or wayward, as children are apt to be, and Lilian was at all times a difficult child to manage. She was imperious and inclined to be obstinate, and I found it rather a puzzle occasionally to know how I could hold the reins tightly in my hands without her being aware of it. I was anxious to guide her by love, as her mother had suggested to me, but this did not always have the desired effect, and I was young and very inexperienced. Even now, as I read my letters, a peremptory knock was heard at my door, and a small head peeping in, a little voice demanded how much longer I was going to be before I went for a walk.

"A quarter of an hour, Lilian," I answered; "you may shut the door, dear."

The command was obeyed, but not quite as I had intended, for the young lady was on the wrong side of the door and within my room, preparing to fidget and ask questions.

"Miss Hamilton, where are we going?"

I did not answer. I was just reading: "The Thorburns hope to be settled in their new house in a week or two. Mr. and Mrs. Thorburn have been up to London to buy carpets and curtains, as if there were none in Halton good enough for them, and the girls are busy working a border for a table-cover, which is to be for the best parlour."

"Miss Hamilton," repeated the little voice; "why don't you answer? Where are we going?"

"I don't know," I answered absently; "run away, Lilian, and don't chatter."

"I 'm not chattering; I only want to know where we 're going."

"I don't know, child. I haven't thought about it."

"Then I wish you would think quick, because Mabel and me want to go into Wentworth and see the soldiers."

"You can't do that," I said, looking up from

my letter, "but if you will only go and ask Nurse to dress you, I will be ready by that time, and then we 'll talk about it."

"Very well," answered the young lady; "I don't mind going, but, remember, you mustn't keep me waiting. I 'll give you a quarter of an hour just, and by that time you must say that you 're going into Wentworth. Don't forget," she shouted, popping her head within the door once more, just as I thought she was retreating down the passage.

I had to read over my mother's letter again to take in the sense of it. It did not contain much news, and said but little of my father. Agnes wrote happily, she said, and seemed to be working well at school; Edmund was in good spirits; Father looked worried and overworked; Mildred was in clover, and happy as the day was long, and they thought themselves uncommonly lucky to have her so well provided for. "Lady Constance wishes her to be called 'Mildred Stuart,'" she said, "she likes it

better than Hamilton. I suppose she does it because it is a family name."

"Yes, and because she is ashamed to show her connection with us," I thought bitterly.

I opened Mildred's letter, written in a warm gushing manner. "She loved darling Lady Constance better and better every day, she was so dear and good to her. She was wearing black now, just like her own child, only, of course, not deep mourning. She had her own little room, and Lady Constance had a French governess who was to speak French with her and Leo, and she was altogether *so* happy. Father came out very often to see her, and she had been twice into Halton to see mother during the last three weeks."

"Well, I suppose I must be grateful for these favours," I said contemptuously, as I threw the letters on to the toilet-table, and prepared for my walk. I dressed myself with extreme care, as I always did now, though my grey homespun was as plainly made as it was

possible for it to be, and my muslin-trimmed hat was only altered by myself to suit the autumnal season. But I knew that my figure was good, and that my hair called forth admiration; so that in case we met Captain Douglas, I was prepared to receive any compliment which he chose to bestow upon me. I had hardly put the finishing touches to my dress, when the three children came scampering in, headed by Lilian, and flinging the door wide back in their chase.

"That is rude, children," I said; "go and shut the door again, Edyth."

"Oh, Miss Hamilton, ain't you ready yet?" asked Lilian.

"Yes, quite; but you musn't say 'ain't,' Lilian, it isn't a pretty word for little girls."

"I suppose it's only pretty for grown-up people," said Mabel, "like you and Uncle Claude?"

"I never say 'ain't,' Mabel; it isn't ladylike."

"Uncle Claude does, though," said Lilian, as if that were conclusive.

After a good deal of coaxing, and a little bullying, I had to accede so far to Lilian's request as to promise I would take them part of the way to Wentworth, in hopes that she might see some of her favourite red-coats.

"But not into the town, remember," I added decidedly; "we will only go along the road and see if we can find some blackberries."

This prospect having satisfied them, we set out, the dolls being taken also, and promised a blackberry-pie if they were good when they came home.

Lilian and Mabel trotted along in front, two dignified matrons with their children, while Edyth and I, who were supposed to represent the governess and eldest daughter, walked behind them. After a good deal of motherly conversation between them as to the complaint from which Mabel's doll was suffering, the topic changed a little.

"Mabel," said Lilian, "can you remember when you were dust?"

"*Quite* well," answered Mabel, with emphasis, as if there were no possibility of a doubt upon the subject.

"And I 'member, too," chimed in Edyth, "I 'member when I was mud."

Here the others both laughed, to Edyth's slight indignation.

"I do," she repeated, "I 'amember it twite well, and the caages used to go over my head when I was lying in the woad, and then I used to sceam out like this, 'Wah!'"

She illustrated her story so forcibly that I was obliged to check her, though I joined with the children in their laugh against her.

"I remember a great many fings," said Mabel; "I remember when you were a baby, Lilian, and Grandmamma gave Mamma that pretty pelisse she showed us the other day."

"Oh, Mabel, what a story!" said Lilian in her decided manner. "You couldn't have

remembered it; you weren't born yourself then."

"No," said Mabel, "but I was getting made up in heaven. I had my head made, and one eye was put in, and I looked through a cloud, and saw Lilian in her blue pelisse taking a walk with Nurse."

"Why didn't you call to me?" said Lilian.

"I couldn't do that, you know, I was too little."

"Oh, yes," said Lilian, "and you had no body, I suppose; you had only a head and two wings, like those pictures we see peeping out of the clouds. Were you like that, Mabel?"

"Yes," answered her sister, "just like that."

I had hard work to restrain my laughter at the thought of the little one-eyed cherub. I did not like to picture the pretty Mabel in this condition, so I said:

"Surely you had two eyes, Mabel, or you could not have seen so much."

"No, Miss Hamilton," she persisted, "I don't think I had, because I remember the first eyes that were put in didn't match. One was blue like this, and the other was"—she paused for a moment—"bright green."

"Dear me, how ugly you must have been," I said; "like a cat, I suppose?"

"No; much uglier than a cat," answered Mabel. "You see it was all the fault of a very stupid angel who didn't know any better. He was always doing fings of that sort; he put in Edy's eyes quite crooked, and had to take them out again twice over. Wasn't he silly?"

I began to be alarmed as to where the conversation might tend, and thought it wiser to change it.

"What a good memory you have," I said; "it is better than mine, for I can only remember when I was a little girl."

"Oh, yes, tell us about that," they all clamoured.

So I told them a long story about our old friends the Smiths and the Joneses, and how we used to be allowed to go into the kitchen and make toffee sometimes when we had been good; all of which gave great satisfaction. I was still in the midst of the interesting recital when Lilian exclaimed:

"There they are, Miss Hamilton, lots of them!"

"Where?" I asked, looking along the road and expecting to see a whole army of soldiers advancing.

"There, there! don't you see them? above your head, and as black as my negro doll's face."

"Lilian, child, what are you talking about?"

"About the blackberries, Miss Hamilton, to be sure," she replied, running forward. "Please lend me your umbrella, and I'll hook them down in a minute."

"I hardly think you can reach so high," I said, laughing at the six-year old maiden's pre-

sumption. "I don't think I can reach them myself, but I will try."

I found the bough to which she had pointed more difficult of access than I had imagined it even, and after several attempts, was obliged to give it up in despair; but I managed to get a good many for the children, nevertheless, though it was at the cost of some scratching.

We had been engaged in this interesting work for more than half an hour, when the sound of horse's hoofs was heard approaching us rapidly, and the children's shout of "Uncle Claude!" brought me to myself, and reminded me of my somewhat ridiculous position; for in my eagerness to reach the bough which had baffled my efforts, I had pulled down some of the lower branches, which had taken revenge upon me by piercing my homespun dress with their sharp thorns, and holding me in a complete trap. To struggle was of little use, and even by slow and patient measures did I almost

despair of extricating myself. Captain Douglas galloped towards us, and reined in his horse suddenly.

"Well, you young pickles, what are you doing here by yourselves? Where's Miss Hamilton?"

"Caught fast in a blackberry-bush," said Lilian, shouting with laughter; "isn't it fun, Uncle Claude? Can you see her?"

I felt very foolish at being thus caught, and not altogether pleased with my little tormentor for showing me up in this way.

Captain Douglas dismounted from his horse, and, passing his arm through the rein, came to my assistance.

"Well, Miss Hamilton, you have found yourself in rather a trap, I fancy; may I help you?"

"Thank you," I said, laughing. "I can't think how I managed it: it was very stupid of me."

"Then you shouldn't run into dangerous

places. Stand still for a moment, please, I think I can undo you. Woa! stand still, you brute."

"Thank you," I said demurely, "but I hardly think I deserve to be called a 'brute,' do I?"

He laughed.

"Hardly that, I agree with you. I might find some other word which would be more applicable to you. Stand still, do, Dick. Children, keep away from the horse."

He took out his penknife, while I remained perfectly still during the operation of cutting away some of the more refractory branches; but it was rather slow work with Dick tossing his head and fidgeting over the flies the whole time.

"How could you get into such a nest of brambles, Miss Hamilton?"

"Because I was determined to reach that top bough, and would not be beaten by it."

"And you preferred being scratched by its

brothers instead; do you call that perseverance, or obstinacy?"

"I know you wish me to say obstinacy," I answered, "so I will acknowledge it at once."

"And also that you deserved to be punished for it. Do you call yourself fit to take the charge of children?"

"Certainly, I do."

"And leave them to the care of the first passing tramp who chooses to carry them off, while you are placing yourself in a picturesque attitude."

"Very picturesque," I said, laughing.

"Yes, very. A bird of gay plumage seated in her nest. You know you thought so," he added in a lower tone.

"Captain Douglas, how can you say such a thing?"

"I won't say it, then; but I may think what I please, I suppose?"

"Yes, if you think the truth; that is certainly untrue, however."

"That you think you looked picturesque? Supposing I thought so?"

"I cannot help what you thought, of course. There—am I free?"

"Very nearly, not quite. Stand still again for one moment."

"You brute!" I added in a low voice.

"You—no, I won't say it."

"Is it so very bad?"

I felt that I was very naughty to flirt with him in this manner, but it was very nice, and he was so unlike anyone I had ever seen before. Besides, it was so perfectly harmless, for was I not the governess?

"I won't tell you what it is," he answered; "it might not be good for you to hear. There, now, you may go. What do you say to me?"

"That I am very much obliged," I answered.

"What would you have done without me?"

"Extricated myself, I suppose."

"Yes, at the expense of most of your clothes. I wish I had come a little later, and seen you

walking home with the children in ragged garments."

"Thank you," I answered; "I should have felt quite proud to think that I could overcome a difficulty, even at the risk of spoiling my clothes."

"And that you were unlike other women in that respect; and rather unlike yourself."

"Do you really think so?" I asked, glancing at him to see if he were in earnest.

"Undoubtedly. When did a woman ever dress herself with the care that you do, without considering her appearance?"

"Nonsense!" I said, colouring; "I am naturally neat. I sometimes wish I wasn't—it's so old-maidish."

"A prospect which must always be viewed from a distance by you, and therefore cannot be fully estimated."

I was not sure of the meaning implied in this speech, so I said:

"Oh, I am not so very young."

"How old—sixteen?"

"Eighteen," I answered with dignity. "Eighteen years I have lived in the world, with a long experience of its wickedness."

"Poor old lady!" he said in a voice of mock compassion; "you look like a woman who has seen sorrow."

"Do I?" I asked. "I know you are laughing at me, but it is true. I have seen sorrow, and bitterness, and envy, hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness."

I felt that this last was true, perhaps springing from my own heart.

"How sad!"

"It is, indeed; otherwise I might not be here."

"How fortunate!"

"Ah, I see, you are laughing at me," I said, "and I will never ask your sympathy when I want it, for you evidently do not know how to appreciate a woman's wrongs."

"Or a woman either," he answered. "I

could never appreciate you, if I lived for a hundred years."

Somehow I felt my face grow very red under my veil at this last speech, though, like a good many others of Captain Douglas, it was a little incomprehensible.

"It is time we were going home, children," I said, thinking that so unprofitable a conversation should be brought to a conclusion. "Come, Edye dear, and take my hand again."

"I shan't go home," said Lilian, defiantly; "I intend to ride Uncle Claude's horse."

"Are you so tired?" asked Uncle Claude. "Ask Miss Hamilton if she wouldn't like a ride too; she looks tired also. Look how red her face is!"

Lilian looked at me, and I laughed.

"Oh," she answered, "of course she is tired after tugging at that old branch. I don't wonder at her face being red."

"Nor do I, Lilian," said Uncle Claude, warmly.

"Nor do I," I echoed in the same tone. "Captain Douglas, are you really going to take Lilian up?"

"If she likes it," he answered. "You 're sure you ain't frightened, little one?"

"Not a bit," said Lilian; "just try me."

He lifted her on to the saddle, and put his arm round her as he walked beside her. This was a delightful treat, and one to which both the others evidently looked forward with much pleasure.

"Uncle Claude, you are very unladylike," said Mabel.

"Am I really? How do you know?"

"Miss Hamilton said so," answered the little mischief-maker.

"Did she, indeed? I am not at all surprised at anything Miss Hamilton says about me; but you are quite right to tell me, Mab. What else did she say?"

"Not even that," I answered, "so I cannot allow Mabel to draw upon her imagination for

any further ideas. When did I say your uncle was unladylike, Mabel?"

"Just before we came out," answered the child.

"Mabel, you're a wicked little story-teller, and you 'll go to hell," said Lilian, indignantly.

"Come, come, young lady, that is rather strong language," said her uncle, gravely, while I endeavoured to stop her at the same moment. "Miss Hamilton, do you encourage Lilian to talk in this manner?"

"Not at all," I answered; "and I observe that this dread future is only held up to those who are untruthful, which I am happy to say Lilian never is; but I think I can solve this problem without proving that poor Mabel has told a story. What was it about, Mab?"

"About saying 'ain't,'" answered Mabel. "You said that it was very unladylike, and a word you never used."

"I thought so," I said, laughing; "but I

never said Uncle Claude might not use it, nor that he was unladylike for doing so."

Captain Douglas laughed heartily.

"Queen Mab, you are a sprite of mischief," he said. "I am sorry that I don't behave like a lady, for some ladies are very charming. But some ladies, again, are very"—here he paused and made a wry face, as if to indicate something very disagreeable—"don't you think so, Lilian?"

"Oh, you mean like Cook?" she answered. "Yes, but then she is so ugly, and she's only a cook. She has red hair, and people with red hair are always horrid."

"Are they?" he said. "Not when it has a beautiful golden tinge in it; not when it is coiled up in masses loosely falling over one another, so carelessly yet so charmingly arranged that only Dame Nature herself could have lent her busy fingers to build the magnificent structure. Hair like that, Lilian, is the most beautiful in the world."

Fortunately for me, the horse walked slightly faster than we did, so that this conversation took place about a yard in front of us.

"Oh," said Lilian, "but that's not a bit like Cook's. Hers is very plain and smooth and glossy. I think, do you know, Uncle, she puts a lot of pomade on it." This in a confidential tone.

"Really, dear me! is that the case? Then Cook must be remonstrated with, Lilian. The most beautiful hair I have ever seen has no pomade to make it glossy, except that which Dame Nature puts on it. She's a capital old woman, but then, you see, she has her favourites as we all have. It is not everyone whose hair she dresses with such care. Wouldn't you like her to come and do yours some day?"

"Yes, Uncle; do you think she would?"

"I haven't a doubt of it; in fact, I think she visits you occasionally now. Yes," he continued, taking up a small golden tress, "this looks very much like her work; but, you see,

she is so busy that she can only spare time to come at night, when you are fast asleep."

This was becoming interesting.

"Please tell me some more," said Lilian. "Does she bring a brush and comb with her?"

"Not a bit of it. She just kisses it, and in a moment all the hair falls into place."

"And what 's the pomade like?"

"Oh, that is made of sunbeams, and when she puts it on some hair it turns to gold and copper, like sovereigns and new bright pennies."

"Poetical comparison!" I ejaculated from behind.

"Very; I was thinking so myself, but I was at a loss for an illustration which would convey any sort of idea to that which was in my own mind. It is possible, however, that you could have supplied one. Will you?"

"I am sorry, but really, my imagination is utterly incapable of doing so, and after your

eloquent flow of language any words of mine would seem tame."

"Then perhaps you could give us a more practical illustration. It is not always necessary to teach in words; pictures are sometimes better."

"I regret that I am incapable of doing that also. May not Mabel ride now for a little while?"

"Certainly. Come, my Fairy Queen, your steed awaits your command. Down with you, Lilian."

Lilian's face flushed.

"No, thank you, Uncle; I mean to ride all the way home."

"Do you, though? I think you are mistaken, Madam," he said, coolly lifting her from the saddle as he spoke.

But Lilian held tight on to the rein, and struggled to retain it. He unclasped her tiny hand without a word, and placed her upon the ground.

"Uncle Claude, I hate you!" she cried passionately, striking at him with her fist. "I won't ever love you any more, and you shan't see my new picture-book that you gave me—there!"

"Lilian, I am quite ashamed of you!" I said, trying to come to the rescue, and receiving a thump which was intended for her uncle. "What will Mamma say when she hears that you have been so naughty?"

"That you and Uncle Claude are both horrid, hateful, cruel creatures!" she said, screaming with rage, during which Captain Douglas lifted Mabel into the saddle, and held her there in safety.

As for poor little Mabel, she was ready to dismount in a moment to accommodate her sister. She was a gentle little creature, and much more unselfish than Lilian, whom she was accustomed to obey in most things. But her uncle would not hear of it, and held her still tighter.

"No, little one; just sit still, and leave Lilian alone," he said. "If she isn't a good girl I 'll tie her on to the horse's tail in a few minutes, and see how she will like being taken home that way."

"There, Lilian, what a threat!" I said, smiling, "and you know Uncle Claude always says what he means. Only fancy how you would look, when we reached home, tied to the horse's tail. Mamma would wonder who it was."

"She would think it was a donkey, of course," said her uncle; "especially if she made that dreadful noise. Come, Lilian, are you going to stop?"

For answer, he only received a still louder howl of indignation; and when I attempted to take her hand, she struck at me again as she had before struck her uncle.

"Lilian," said Captain Douglas, more gravely than he had yet spoken, "I will not allow that. You may beat me as much as you please, but

you shall not touch Miss Hamilton—do you hear?"

"Please don't speak to her," I said in a low voice; "if we take no notice of her she will soon get tired of making that noise, and will forget it in time. I know her way."

"All right, then; but, by Jove! she shan't knock you about."

"I don't think her little hands will injure me," I said very softly. "You see, she is getting quieter already."

So we continued to talk, I holding Edyth's hand, who was too timid to mount the horse, and walking on the path while my companion strode through the dusty road beside Mabel. By degrees Lilian's wrath subsided, though she continued to lag behind us, and when she had ceased crying, began to talk to her doll in her old-fashioned way.

"And, Gertrude, when you 've grown up I hope you won't be as horrid and ill-natured as Uncle Claude and Miss Hamilton, or else I

shall hate you as much as I do them. I used to think Uncle Claude was very pretty, but I don't now, do you?"

Here the doll was pinched and made to utter a squeak by way of reply.

"Yes, of course, Gertrude; no one is ever pretty when they 's naughty, and sometimes he' s very naughty and very cruel. He teases his poor little nieces and makes them cry, and takes away their own horse and gives it to other people, and he says rude words like 'ain't,' which I hope you 'll never say. If I were you I wouldn't have him for a Papa any longer, I 'd get a new Papa made in heaven; won't you, Gertrude? just send for one, and tell him to come down quick."

Captain Douglas laughed as he said:

"I believe your plan is answering after all, Miss Hamilton."

"Oh, yes, she will come round in time. Her little imagination soon furnishes a new idea."

"Does she learn that from you?"

"I don't know, I am sure, but I hardly think so; I haven't many ideas."

"Haven't you? I thought you had. I haven't known you for the last month or two without seeing how your mind changes."

"Does it?" I said, opening my eyes; "pray, in what way?"

"Well, perhaps I ought to say how your moods change."

"Oh, everyone's do that, surely. Don't yours?"

"Undoubtedly; but perhaps they don't show the different sides of my character so clearly as yours do."

"Captain Douglas, what do you mean?" I said, laughing; "your speeches quite alarm me."

"Do they? I am sorry for that, because I have no wish to frighten you seriously, but I have often recalled you as I saw you upon the three or four occasions in which we first met,

and contrasted you with what you seem to be now."

"Do explain yourself."

"The first time I saw you, you were playing a benevolent part, calling upon some patient of your father's who lived over a shop in Halton. It is very possible that you did not see me, but I noticed you then as you walked through the shop, and even afterwards. A dignified little lady, with stately step and calm deportment, acting the Lady Bountiful."

My face crimsoned in an instant. How well I remembered it also! Was it possible that he was not even now ridiculing me for my intimacy with those dreadful Thorburns—for the rude manner in which he had been commented upon? But I would not betray myself; in spite of my blush, I said calmly:

"And then?"

"When next we met you were the half-timid, half coquettish maiden, not quite clear as to what you ought to do; longing to be at ease,

yet fearful that your friends might criticise you too harshly if you were to show them your natural self. Dignified still, but with a dignity which would wear off if properly treated. The difficulty was to know how this could be done——"

"And so you took advantage of it by being very familiar and off-hand in your manner," I interrupted. "I recollect perfectly, and the impression that I formed of you also. Pray go on; what was the next?"

"The next occasion that I speak of, barring the two or three times in which we casually met at Halton, you were—but this will make you angry, I am afraid."

"No, it will not; go on, please."

"Well, then, the next time was in the train, on our way to Wentworth, and there I saw a more dignified young lady still; one who, though really very shy, was conscious of her power and her superiority, and who wished to show me that she was going to be the governess

in Mrs. Douglas' family, and therefore permitted no liberties on my part."

"Was I not right?" I asked demurely.

"Perfectly; but unfortunately this mood would not, could not last: it broke down at length into merry laughter and childish frolic; and the girl I saw playing in the hay-field, with one loose tress of hair twisted over her shoulder, was a different being from Lady Bountiful, Miss Hamilton the guest of Lady Constance Milford, or the governess to Mrs. Douglas' children."

"But surely you do not condemn me for all this, Captain Douglas, do you?"

"Condemn you? No. Anyone has a perfect right to behave as he or she pleases, so far as I am concerned."

"But you are laughing at me, I think," I said, rather mortified. "You must remember that mine is a very difficult position."

"Of course it is: do you think I haven't taken that into consideration? All that I was

amused at, was your acting your part so well, though, like the Cinderella of old, you showed your true self when once the garb of bondage was laid aside."

"So you call my position 'bondage,' do you?" I said, wincing a little. "I think I am a very happy slave."

"Now you are, but you were not then, and you dreaded what the position might be, would be, in fact. You were not quite happy the first hour that you spent in this house, nor were you the first day you entered into office. However '*Nous avons changé tout cela!*' What makes you happy now?"

I knew partly what made me happy, though as yet I would not acknowledge it even to myself. I wondered if he knew also, as he repeated in a lower voice:

"What makes you happy?"

"Everything: how can I be otherwise with such pleasant surroundings? You are quite right, Captain Douglas; I did dread coming

into this house. I did not know what a governess' life would be, or what she ought to do. If my behaviour was strange the first day, please do not ascribe it to any desire on my part to be disagreeable, but simply because I thought it was only proper that I should be dignified and quiet."

"I know, I know," he repeated. "Of course, you poor little thing, you had never had any experience of such a life, and I am very thankful that it has turned out differently from what you expected."

"So am I," I said warmly, "and that everyone is so very kind and good to me. However, Captain Douglas, I did not quite understand you the first day that I lunched here; I thought you would not speak to me, and concluded that it was because you thought that now I was in a different position from that in which you had seen me last."

"Not at all; I thought you preferred to be left alone, so I tried not to embarrass you by

talking. Did you think I was unkind? You understand me better now, don't you?"

"Yes, I think so; but tell me one thing, please. What did you mean by telling Lilian that I had killed you? was it because I played my waltz too fast?"

He laughed.

"Not quite. I was not suffering much physically, I think."

"Mentally, then, I suppose. But I cannot understand it any better."

"Perhaps it is just as well that you should not," he said coolly.

"You will not enlighten me, then?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I can't do that. Some day I will, perhaps, but certainly not now."

"That is usually your answer when I want to know anything," I said, tossing my head with mock pettishness.

"The moral of that is, don't try to know too much," he answered, beginning to whistle.

We were getting near the house by this time, and the children were anxious to have a race homewards. Lilian had nearly recovered her good temper, and it became quite restored by my arrangement of the runners one behind another, while I took charge of the dolls. We walked the rest of the way in comparative silence, Captain Douglas whistling softly to himself, and occasionally breaking out into little bursts of song. The sun was lowering in the west, gliding down to his resting-place on banks of purple and crimson, and leaving a golden autumnal glow upon the changing leaves. I watched the glow of his departing rays as it lit up the windows of the Court, and almost sighed to think that this happy afternoon had come to a close. Then I ran upstairs to my little room, my sanctum, which, facing westward, was filled with all the glory of this setting sun, and throwing myself into my arm-chair, watched him sink down lower and lower, till only the pale gold of the distant horizon

remained to show what his splendour had been. After all, life was very sweet, and these were golden days.

## CHAPTER III.

### HIDDEN HOPES.

"Ah, leave thy little heart at rest!
For it is so light, I think, so light,
Some wind would blow it away to-night."

*Owen Meredith.*

It was Saturday night; a cold, cheerless, misty evening in December, closing in a raw miserable day. There was no company in the house now—all gaieties were being reserved for the Christmas week; and Mrs. Douglas and I sat alone in the large drawing-room, glad to forget the outside world before the cheerful fire. The time was drawing on rapidly to the

holidays, and I found it difficult to realise that I had actually been in the house three months. It made me almost low-spirited to think that I must so soon leave it, although I had the prospect of returning again. There was a strange restlessness in my spirit which was almost indefinable. Why did I care about leaving this pretty old house when I was going home to those I loved best on earth? Did I love them best? I hardly knew. The question had never forced itself directly into my mind, and if I had put it before me I should have felt myself unable to reply to it. The time had flown with lightning rapidity; and yet, in looking back, a volume of circumstances, made up of trivial details, perhaps even more trivial pleasures, had bound itself together in my heart, which would leave an everlasting impression upon it. In vain I assured myself of my folly, in vain I endeavoured to steel my mind against foolish thoughts which would rear their phantom heads and intrude themselves upon me.

Again and again I made resolutions, which I forgot upon the first opportunity of their being broken, and I began to fear that now I had drifted into a wide sea from which there was no hope of rescue. The thought of Captain Douglas marrying me had never dawned upon my imagination. I had been content to take his flattering speeches, and hear his *doubles entendres*, believing that I knew their worth, and could afford to laugh at them. But this sort of thing had gone on too long now, and though I assured my heart that nothing could come of it, I was nevertheless restless, and anxious to know the real state of his mind.

Although it was only four o'clock it was already too dark to see the work which we held in our hands, and after one or two ineffectual attempts I threw it down, and abandoned myself to the pleasure of our own chatter. Mrs. Douglas knew a good deal about me by this time. I had told her of some of

my difficulties at home, and of the many heart-burnings which had marred my peace there; of the manner in which I had heard of her situation, and the reluctance I had at first felt in accepting it; and now, how glad I was that heaven had guided me hither and given me such a pleasant home and good friends. She always listened to my confidences with interest, and endeavoured to give me the best advice according to her wisdom; but I do not think that she quite approved of my want of affection for the home in which I had been born, and when I now spoke with regret about my returning thither, she said, with as much mild reproof as there could be in her tone:

"I do not know why it is that girls are so often unhappy in their own family. There must be something wrong, Ella, for them to feel so. It is the same with my own sister Ethel. I am always having worried letters from her, full of complaints of her life. I do wish she would marry."

"I suppose she will some day," I said, feeling the rebuke and anxious to change the subject. "If she is so fascinating, she is sure to."

"But that is just the trouble," answered Mrs. Douglas. "People are very apt to fall in love with her, but she cares for none of them. I hoped that she would marry Captain Blagrove, to whom she has been engaged now for some time, but she has broken off her engagement; and really, she does seem unhappy now."

"What a strange girl!" I said. I could only judge of her by myself, who would have been too glad to find myself really engaged, with some sort of claim upon the man who was fretting my heart sorely by his conduct. "She must know whether she cares for him or not."

"No," said Mrs. Douglas, "I don't think she does. She wrote piteously to me that she could not *live* **upon** twopence a year, though

he offered her a thousand, and she has three hundred of her own. I think she is rather envious of me. She has always said that she would not marry unless she could do exactly as I do; and that, of course, is absurd, if she marries anyone whom she cares about."

"Of course," said I, laughing.

"She has a step-mother," continued my friend, "who has no influence over her, and Papa believes in her thoroughly. She fascinates him, I fancy, as she does the rest of the world."

"Very likely," said I.

"Do you know," said Mrs. Douglas, "I often wish that Claude would marry her. At one time I thought he would. And I think he could manage her if anyone could do so."

Oh, the quick beating at my heart! the pang which shot through it like lightning!

"Do you think he likes her?" I asked, taking advantage of the dim fire-light to hide the blush on my cheek.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Douglas. "Claude is hard to please, and his standard of women is high. I used to fancy he did, but there are many things about Ethel of which I am afraid he would not approve. Claude is a flirt too, but he is not exactly a marrying man."

A silence followed after this. I could not speak, for I knew that my voice would tremble. A sickly feeling had stolen over me, which had robbed my peace. I sat quite still, taking up my knitting again, in which I endeavoured to form stitches by the cheerful blaze; but soon lights were brought, the room was closed, and a merry procession bounding in, headed by Lancelot, put a stop to our reflections, and gave us other work to do. We were still in the delights of "kiss-in-the-ring," when the door opened again, and two muddy horsemen presented themselves. Then there was a fresh shout, and Papa and Uncle Claude had to enter the charmed circle in their muddy condition.

Mr. Douglas had brought me a letter from

my father, and as soon as I could escape, I ran to my own room to read it. Mrs. Douglas' words had caused a slight stiffness in my manner towards Captain Douglas, although, as usual, his was the frank free manner which I had always known. During the rhyme we had just sung, Lilian's eyes had watched eagerly for her uncle's selection in the command that he was "to kiss the one that he loved best." I would not look at him, but I felt rather than saw that his eyes were fixed upon me for the space of a second, probably in mockery of my own transparent weakness, but the next moment Edyth had been caught up and kissed, and this, of course, had decided the question. I knew that he had come to stay till Monday, as he so often did, and I determined to remain in my own room as long as I could, and thus avoid his presence. It was better to keep out of harm's way, I reflected, although the possibility of any harm seemed too absurd to be contemplated.

I opened my father's letter, reading it over slowly the better to comprehend its contents. My mind was still wandering restlessly back to our conversation, and I felt slightly regretful that I had left the merry party, when my eyes struck upon a paragraph which stopped their progress in a moment, and caused me to set my teeth in indignation. My father wrote that he had had a letter from Mr. Thorburn, in which he had made a formal proposal for his son George to marry Agnes. Mr. Thorburn had hinted that it would be a good thing for the girl, for his son would succeed him in business and probably hold his head a deal higher in Halton than she would. My father added that they were now living in their new house, and that Mr. Thorburn was becoming an important member of the town; but still he declared such a marriage was not to be contemplated for a moment, and that he had written to tell him so. Agnes was still at school, and as yet unaware of the proposal.

My father did not think that she would consent to it, and that, independently of his objection to her marrying below her own station in life, there were other reasons which would render it quite impossible.

"I should think so," I said savagely, as I ground my teeth with rage. "Oh, Agnes! if it should ever come to that, we could never hold up our heads again."

I flung the letter on to my table with a gesture of impatience, and leaned back in my chair to think over its contents, and to frame my answer. I determined it should be something very strong, and that I should lose no time in replying to it; and though I knew that I could not post it before the next day, I felt as if it would be impossible to wait till then, so feverish and impatient was I. As I dressed myself for dinner I gave myself nearly an hour's grace, that I might go down to the drawing-room again, where it was warmer than here, and where I could scribble down my

ideas without fear of interruption. I carried my portfolio with me, and sitting down before the silver ink-stand, began to write impetuously, as I should probably have spoken were I in my father's presence. I condemned Mr. Thorburn and his son for their intrusive impertinence, and declared that no power on earth should induce Agnes to accept such a man. For he was not only a snob himself, but the son of a snob; a low, vulgar person, with whom we could never have any dealings. I blamed my father for ever having permitted any intercourse between the two families, and said we had ourselves to thank for all the disagreeables to which we were subjected. Having thus expressed myself, I folded up the letter and placed it in an envelope. Some one pushed open the door softly at this moment and peeped in, and then a low voice said:

"I beg your pardon, Miss, I thought it was Mrs. Douglas."

It was Burton, the housekeeper.

"Did you wish to see her?" I inquired. "She has not yet come downstairs."

"Yes, I did, Miss, thank you. It was only a little question which I wanted to ask."

"Indeed!" I hesitated. "Burton, do you know if anyone is likely to go into Wentworth to-night, who could take a letter for me?"

"Yes, Miss; James, the groom, could take it. He has to go to the blacksmith's for something, and could post it before eight."

"That would do nicely," I answered. "Stay, I haven't a stamp here, but you would find one in my room, just inside my desk. It is not locked. Would you mind putting one on for me?"

"Certainly, Miss; with much pleasure," answered the woman, carrying off the letter with her.

"That is a relief," I muttered to myself, sinking back again into the soft cushioned chair by the table; "at any rate my father will know my opinion upon the subject."

I took up a book which lay beside me, and idly turned its leaves as the disagreeable subject weighed still upon my mind. I was not thinking of it only; Mrs. Douglas' words stirred me with a disagreeable feeling of distrust which I would thankfully have put from me, and the two combined made my reflections far from enviable at that moment. The book I held was the same album which I had looked at the first evening I came into the house, and some desire prompted me to turn the pages till I came to the beautiful face of the coquette who had so much interested me. I sat holding it before me till my thoughts were disturbed by a footstep coming along the passage—a footstep which I knew well, and which sent the colour to my face as I heard it advance towards the drawing-room door. I did not wish to betray consciousness, and bent my head still lower over the book, apparently absorbed in its contents. I did not even look up as Captain Douglas came up the room and

stood behind me. Coolly looking over my shoulder, he said:

"That picture seems to have a great fascination for you. Do you admire her very much?"

This was precisely what I wished to know from him. Now was the opportunity to hear his opinion. I could not ask the question directly, as he had done to me, so I said, dissemblingly:

"She is very beautiful and very fascinating, I hear—perhaps too much so."

There was a pause. I could not see his face, and could only judge of its expression by his words, which came in another moment. During that pause he had possibly been studying the face as I was.

"Yes, she appears to do a little damage with those eyes of hers. I suppose some men find her very jolly."

Here was indifference, at any rate.

"Don't you?" I ventured to inquire.

"I don't know much about the girl," was his answer; "but if you ask my opinion of her character, I would rather leave her alone. She is not so innocent as she looks. In fact, she is capable of doing anything which enters her imagination."

"Making people fall in love with her?" I asked archly, though my heart beat nervously.

"Perhaps so. She seems to do it uncommonly fast. I wonder why men are such fools."

"Perhaps she flatters them," I said wickedly. "All men are open to flattery."

"Who would not be when it comes from a pretty girl? The worst of it is, though, that the girls one wants to flatter one, never do so."

I laid the open book upon the table, and moved my chair slightly to look at it. As I bent over it, Captain Douglas bent his head also. I drew back rather abruptly, for our

heads had nearly touched and I could almost feel his breath upon my cheek.

"What is the matter, Miss Hamilton?" he said stiffly. "Do you think I am going to bite you?"

I blushed deeply, and tried to laugh while uttering some feeble remonstrance.

"What is the matter with you to-night?" asked my companion after a pause, during which he had come round and stood in front of me.

"Nothing in the world. Does anything seem to be the matter?"

"You are not quite as usual," he answered. "Has the sight of Ethel Blantyre disturbed you?"

"No; why should it?"

"Why, indeed? Still I venture to think that something you have heard about her has made you uneasy."

"How absurd!" I said, laughing; "she has surely nothing to do with me."

"May I guess one thought which has passed through your mind concerning her?"

"Twenty," I answered boldly, and with an appearance of utter indifference.

He lowered his voice.

"You are afraid of her?" he said, looking at me.

"Afraid of her?" I repeated; "what can you mean, Captain Douglas?"

"You are afraid of her power," he said again. "You think that if she came here I would lose my heart to her."

"You are mistaken," I replied haughtily; "such an idea has not occurred to me." (Was I quite truthful in saying this?) "But, even supposing it to be so, what can that have to do with me?"

"You would not care, then, if I were to fall in love with her?"

"Certainly not!" I replied, with angry scorn.

His look and manner changed, and he said softly:

"Is this true?"

"Of course," I answered again, my cheeks flushed, my cold hands clasping each other nervously; "besides," I stammered, "you have no right to ask me such a question."

"No right to know whether you liked me as much as I hoped?" he said in a lower voice still, which seemed to me like a voice far away amid the surging billows of my throbbing heart. "Have I no right to know, Ella?"

I covered my face with my hands.

"Hush!" I whispered, in my tumult not knowing how I answered him.

"I am right, then! Jealous little girl! you need not fear the attractions of the fair Ethel. Charming she may be, but there is someone else more charming still." He paused abruptly, looking, as he spoke, at my face.

How could I doubt that this was meant for me? But still I would not yield to the supposition.

"You are quite wrong," I said again, my

eyes flashing with excitement. "I am not jealous of Miss Blantyre, and," I added nervously, "from what you say—I suppose—there is no need for me to be so?"

"None at all," he said in his usual tone; "Ethel Blantyre will not compare with you in any way; in fact, I will not even name you together in the same breath."

"Rather an ambiguous compliment, however, after what you have just said of her," I answered; but I could not speak so calmly as I wished, in spite of my effort at bravery. His words had unnerved me, and struck back upon my sensitive imagination, bringing with them a tumult of pleasure which was akin to pain. He must care for me, or why did he wish to assure himself of my feeling towards him? And yet, why did he betray himself by taking advantage of my weakness? Angry with myself for allowing him to see the power his words had over me, I braced myself up, and said scornfully:

"But you flatter yourself very highly if you suppose that I ever took this subject into consideration for a moment. What does it matter to me if you fall in love with a hundred girls?"

"Not much, I daresay," he said, smiling provokingly; "there is safety in numbers: *one* might be more likely to rouse such feelings."

"Really?" I said, curling my lip. "Then allow me to tell you that you are quite mistaken, Captain Douglas. I am not the vain weak creature that you seem to suppose. I can take your flattery for what it is worth; and as a proof of how little I value it, you are at liberty to flirt as much as you please with Miss Blantyre before my eyes, and may you fall a victim to her fascination like the rest of your sex."

He laughed good-humouredly, which only irritated me further.

"What a splendid opportunity it will be for

you to show your powers in that way!" I continued in the same tone. "You are very clever in the art of flirting, I should say, and I am glad that you will have someone who will be able to cope with you better than I can."

"What an adept she must be!" he said quietly.

"I am sure I do not flirt," I said, half laughing, but angry and impetuous still.

"Never?"

"No—at least, I don't know what you mean. I talk a great deal of nonsense, as do you; but we both understand each other, and know that we don't mean a word of it."

"Speak for yourself, if you please."

"And for you also," I answered; and blushing again, I continued: "You know that you did not mean your words just now when you said——" I stopped abruptly. How could I finish my sentence?

"When I said that you were afraid of my liking Ethel Blantyre better than you?"

"No, not only that; when you said—something else."

"What?" he asked, lowering his voice till it almost sank into a whisper.

"You know," I said as softly, my heart beating quickly again at the remembrance.

"When I said that I had a right to know whether you cared for me as much as I hoped?"

"Yes," I replied more boldly; "of course you know that that is all nonsense, and that you do not mean one word of it. Therefore it is worse than flirting, to make such a speech to me."

"You do not believe me?" he said, gazing into my face with earnest eyes. "I am willing to repeat it, then. I would give a great deal to know what your real, true opinion is of me. Will you not let me learn it?"

"I think you are a great flirt," I said, half angrily, but excited with a tumult of feeling. "No one but a flirt would ask such a question.

I might as well put it to you; but if I did, I should deserve any harsh criticism which you chose to bestow upon me."

"I am willing to believe the question asked, then, already," he replied, "and will answer it if you like. My opinion of you is, that you are a very lovely, and, still better, a very loveable girl. I will not sum up the different points of your character which make you so, but, in a word, the most charming I have ever seen."

"There, that is enough," I said, stopping my ears playfully, though the flattery was delicious to them. "If that is really so, you should have too much regard for me to ask embarrassing questions, you should treat me with more respect; in short, you should never forget that I am only the governess to Mrs. Douglas' children."

I lowered my voice as I uttered the last words. Surely he would understand now how awkward my position was.

"I shall use my own discretion," he answered lightly. "If you wish to forbid my speaking to you as I do, you must say so; otherwise, I must persecute you with my attentions. Which is it to be?"

"You know," I answered. "But please, Captain Douglas, remember that my knowledge of the world is small, and——" I hesitated again; I could not say "do not entangle me in a web of love from which I cannot be extricated." I played nervously with my handkerchief. Captain Douglas stretched out his hand, and took my cold fingers into his own.

"What is it, tell me?" he whispered softly.

"Only that. That I am the governess in this house; that I cannot help it, but so it is. Oh, Captain Douglas, please remember it, but do not lose your respect for me."

I felt the tears rising, and a lump in my throat almost choked me. It was so hard thus to place a barrier between us.

"Ella," he said, "I know more of you than

you suppose; more, perhaps, than you know yourself——" He stopped abruptly; soft footsteps were stealing along the passage, and presently a head intruded itself. It was Burton, the housekeeper, again.

"I beg your pardon, Miss," she said apologetically, "but would it matter much if your letter wasn't posted till to-morrow? James isn't going to Wentworth to-night, after all."

"Oh, no," I replied carelessly, and without turning my head. "It will do in the morning. Please to put it on my toilet-table, Burton, and I will see to it myself."

"Very well, Miss," said the woman, and withdrew.

Captain Douglas had risen from the chair upon which he was seated facing me when she entered the room, and had been idly turning over the red morocco books upon the table. He now walked towards the fire-place, and stood upon the hearth-rug without finishing his sentence.

"What were you going to say?" I asked, with beating heart, after the door was closed again.

"Only that I think I know you," he said calmly; "better, perhaps, than you know yourself. Do not mistrust me, Ella; I will take no advantage of your position, but you cannot prevent my being your friend. Only suffer yourself to know me a little better, and you will believe in the truth of my regard for you."

He looked into the fire as he spoke, but not at me. I was disappointed; his words sounded colder and more matter-of-fact than they had been before, and yet there was a ring of true metal in them, though they were different from the style of his usually playful conversation. I could not understand him, though I believed, or tried to believe, that what he said was true. He must have some regard for me, or why did he seek my society in this way? Why had he now sought me, and discovered

that I was in the drawing-room so long before the usual time, if he had not been anxious to be with me? He had come down ready dressed for the pleasure of a *tête-à-tête* as I firmly believed, and yet now he stood away from me, gazing down into the fire, and when he spoke again it was in a different tone of voice, as if he already had begun to repent of his words. It was very inexplicable. I saw him no more for the rest of the evening, save as a member of the family, and tried to be as natural towards him as I could. I did not wish to appear constrained, or even on the look-out for his attentions, and therefore avoided saying good-night to him by slipping out of the room early in the evening with only a good-night which was intended for the whole family. Our conversation had put away from my mind that other subject which had troubled it before, and the sight of my unposted letter upon the toilet-table was my first reminder of Agnes and her prospects. I took

it up and turned it over, not with any special motive for so doing, but simply as an idle act called forth by its presence. To my astonishment it was open. In my haste I must have omitted to fasten it, or I had done so very carelessly; but determined that I would not vex my bosom with a second perusal, I secured it, this time too firmly for such an accident to occur again; and then I set myself to undress, hoping to put all thoughts of it as far from my mind as possible. One dream was enough for the present, and the future was surely sufficient to take care of itself.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE GARDEN OF EDEN.

"For since the time when Adam first
Embraced his Eve in happy hour,
And every bird of Eden burst
In carol, every bud to flower,
What eyes, like thine, have wakened hopes?"

*Tennyson.*

THE next morning gave us no better signs of a fair day than its predecessor. True, the wind had risen slightly, clearing off some of the grey fog which had hung about the meadows for several days, but it had only brought with it gusty showers of rain and sleet, and everything in nature looked gloomy, and sodden with

moisture. Even the thick walls of the old house had not proved impenetrable to the damp, which lay in patches of mould upon many of them, and made us appreciate the large fires which were kept up in all the rooms we occupied. Notwithstanding, however, we drove into Wentworth to church, as usual. On fine days we walked, but to-day this was out of the question, even for me, who was generally foremost among the pedestrians, and I was glad to take advantage of Mrs. Douglas' offer to join the family in the closed carriage. With the morning my naturally buoyant spirits had revived, and I felt genuinely happy. The letter from my father was forgotten—at any rate, for a time—and my own intemperate words likewise, which was, perhaps, fortunate for me. For had I reflected, it is probable that I should have repented of my anger a little, and regretted that I should have used the expressions which I had towards a man who, though in an inferior position, had once been

kind to my father. But to-day my thoughts were in another channel: chasing themselves backwards and forwards, they always arrived at the same point, viz. that Captain Douglas had now expressed his regard for me and begged me to trust in him. And I would trust him, till the future should make itself plain, the distant prospect of which made the blood dance in my veins.

I wonder if there is anything more intoxicating to the senses than one's first love-dream? The aspect of outward things seems to change, and this dull, common-place world loses its reality. To-day, though the wintry wind howled round the old church, though the dripping rain fell from the ivy-covered porch with an ugly splash on to the pavement below, there was still an inner life which lighted up the gloomy atmosphere. As the organ boomed forth its first voluntary, what was it that struck upon my senses, blending religion, poetry, and music in one harmonious whole? What was it

all but the mystery of love? Why did every movement of my friend, every turn of his head, every musical response, dart through my frame, mingling with the beauty of the whole, and becoming a part of it to my imagination? Truly I believed myself to be in a religious frame of mind, as I thanked God fervently for my happiness, and prayed for a continuance of it.

I had hardly addressed Captain Douglas that morning. He came down very late for breakfast, and immediately afterwards I had stolen away to the nursery to have a romp with Baby, and to see that the little girls were getting ready for church. I was determined not to put myself in his way, though at the same time not to avoid him, but to allow him to seek me if he really wished for my society. In fact, I had laid down model principles for myself since last night: I would be reserved, yet not cold; dignified, though not proud; careful not to meet him alone, yet taking care to

be natural if I did meet him. Above all, he should not know the state of my heart; never, never, till he could come to me and lay bare his own; of this I was fully determined.

With these thoughts in my mind I sat next but one to him in church, Lilian only separating us. My head was bent over my book in apparent forgetfulness of his presence; and yet I dwelt with a sacred pleasure on the thought that our prayers and praises ascended to heaven as one, and as one might be received above. There was something delightful in this idea; for who could tell whether, even now, we were not one in the sight of Him who made us? I wondered whether he too thought of it, as I listened to the strong, deep voice which almost drowned my feeble responses. If he did think of it, he must have been as clever at concealing his feelings as I was myself, for nothing could have been gathered from his face as he leaned back with folded arms, and settled himself for the sermon. As for me, I fear that the

worthy rector's discourse was lost upon me, for the fairy castles were mounting higher and higher. I had just settled the fate of the whole family down to Agnes, who was to marry Mr. John Milford, when I heard the words "And now to God the Father," &c., which made me involuntarily rise to my feet, and recollect, with a feeling of shame and penitence, that I had not listened to a word of the sermon.

The two brothers walked home in spite of the driving rain, and Mrs. Douglas and I had the children to ourselves for the next hour. After their early dinner we usually went to church again, leaving them at home, and then they had what they called their "Sunday lessons" with me, which consisted of a child's catechism and a hymn. But to-day no one felt inclined to venture out a second time, and I went up to the schoolroom earlier than usual, and offered to read them a story. This suggestion was always hailed with pleasure. The

dolls were brought too, and placed in diminutive chairs, their blank waxen faces staring vacantly into the fire while they were appealed to for an opinion, or scolded for imperfect answers, which were supplied by Lilian's vivid imagination. The narrative chosen upon the present occasion was the history of the Fall, as represented in "Mamma's Bible Stories," and after listening with deep interest to the account of it, I ventured to draw a moral lesson from the story, pointing out the disastrous effects of disobedience. But these children had their own opinion upon all subjects, and now Mabel said:

"I don't fink it was a vewy wicked thing to eat an apple. At least, if it was so naughty of Eve, it must be naughty of us to eat apple-pie."

"Yes," added Lilian, "and apples for dessert, and baked apples for luncheon."

"And oranges," chimed in the four-year old Edyth, emphatically.

"Oh, no!" I said, "that is not it at all. God was not angry with Eve for eating an apple, but for doing so after He had commanded her not to do it. If I put an apple upon this table and told you on no account to touch it, don't you think it would be very naughty of you to do so?"

"Yes," said the little ones.

"And yet it would not be naughty if the apple was put there for you, and you knew that you had permission to eat it. It would not be naughty if you were to run and open that door, but if I said, 'Lilian, you must on no account open the door, I wish it kept shut,' I should think you a very naughty little girl for disobeying me."

Fatal remark! I had hardly concluded it when a loud tapping was heard on the outside of the said door.

"You can't come in," shouted Lilian; "Miss Hamilton won't have the door opened."

Before the command was given, however,

the handle of the door was turned, and Uncle Claude's face presented itself.

"There, now!" said Lilian; "that's just as bad as Eve, and you must be turned out of the Garden of Eden. Come, Mabel, let us put him out. We must be the angels with the flaming swords."

"Stop, children!" I said, laughing; "of course your uncle isn't disobedient, because he knows nothing about the command given."

"What command?" asked Captain Douglas. "Am I trespassing here? What do you mean by the Garden of Eden, children?"

Lilian explained, but in her own way, saying that Miss Hamilton had just ordered the door to be kept closed, and telling them that they would be like Eve if they disobeyed her.

"Oh, I see. This is Paradise, I suppose. There, now, I am like Adam; there sits Eve, and she has just offered me the forbidden fruit."

He looked at me as he spoke, but to-day I would not flirt.

"Children, that is enough," I said, closing the book; "we won't have any more reading now."

"No; but please let us play about it," said Lilian. "Go on Uncle, Miss Hamilton is Eve and you are Adam, and Mabel and I are the two angels."

"And me, too," chimed in Edyth.

"No, Edyth, you're too little to be an angel; you must be little Cain and Abel."

"I can't be two peoples," said Edyth.

"Well, then, you can be Abel first, and then you can be killed, you know, and be Cain afterwards."

"No, no," I remonstrated, in spite of Uncle Claude's encouragement; "we won't have any more of that now. Bring the dolls, and we will sing some hymns."

"I dont want to sing hymns," said Mabel.

"And I shan't sing any," said Lilian. "Come, Mabel, you shall be my pony."

Captain Douglas sat down in one of the three vacant chairs before the fire, and fixed his eyes upon the red embers. I opened a book, and feeling that I was not very polite, began to read, or to pretend to do so. An awkward pause ensued, awkward at least to me. I felt my heart beat, but I did not venture to look up, or to make a remark, and thus we sat for five minutes, till at last the silence was broken by my companion.

"How many weeks is it to Christmas?" he asked abruptly, as if addressing himself to the fire.

"Two," I answered briefly, bending over my book again.

"Is it really? Dear me, how time flies! Are you going home then, Miss Hamilton?"

Some spirit of mischief induced me to say, "Yes. I don't think I shall return."

I looked at his face to see if my words had made any impression upon him; but he sat immoveable, no change visible upon his features.

"Indeed! it would be a pity for you not to do that."

"Why so?"

"Because probably you might regret it."

I felt that I was beginning to talk nonsense again, and that he might see through my motive. It was weak to try and draw a confession from him in this manner. I smiled, and said naturally: "No; I shall only go home for a fortnight."

"Will you be at Milford at all during that time?"

I flushed a little.

"I don't know; possibly I may."

"To stay?"

"No, I think not. Why do you wish to know?"

"Because I am going over to see Constance for a day or two, and I should like to see you also, if I may. Do you think I should be allowed to do so?"

All this addressed to the fire, apparently; not one look towards me.

"I don't know about being allowed," I answered lightly. "Of course, if I were staying with Lady Constance, and you came there, I should be likely to see you; but as I am not going to stay with her, the probability of our meeting is very slight."

He stretched out his hands to the fire, and bent himself forward on his chair to do so.

"If my cousin were to ask you, would you go?" he inquired, after a pause.

An angry flush mounted to my cheek; delightful as the thought was of my seeing him in that way, my pride would not suffer me to permit such an arrangement.

"No," I replied, "I don't think I would."

He looked at me for the first time, with a slight surprise in his face.

"Why not?" he asked softly.

"I have my own reasons," I answered shortly.

"May I know them?"

"No; I would rather that you did not."

"You would not wish to meet me there; is that what I am to understand?" The face was turned to the fire again, with a grave steady gaze.

"No, indeed," I said earnestly, fearful that he would misunderstand me, and perhaps give me up altogether. "That was not my motive. It has nothing to do with you."

"Putting me out of the question, then, altogether, you would not pay a visit to Lady Constance Milford if she were to ask you to do so?"

"Putting you aside altogether, I would not," I answered.

"Do you not like her?"

"Ye-s," I answered slowly.

"But not very much? I am surprised at that; I thought you had taken a fancy to her."

"I did at one time; I don't care for her now."

"Has she done anything to offend you?"

"No, not particularly; please don't ask me, Captain Douglas, I cannot tell you."

He sat silent for a minute. "Poor Constance!" he then muttered softly.

"Are you as infatuated about her as the rest of the world?" I asked bitterly.

"Not infatuated at all. I have known her all my life, and look upon her as a sort of sister. She is a kind of double cousin to me, for she is my own first cousin, and she married a cousin of mine also."

"Was Sir Leopold her cousin?" I asked, with curiosity.

"No, but he was mine. His mother was a Miss Douglas, a sister of my father's; Lady Constance's mother is my aunt, a sister of my mother's."

"Lady Brantford?" I asked, still more surprised, "is she your aunt?"

"Yes, and has been a very good aunt to me. I hope you may know her some day."

My heart throbbed. To what future time was he looking forward?

"It is not at all likely that I shall ever know her," I said coldly; "I have seen her at a distance, but our acquaintance is not very probable."

"You mean by that haughty tone that you do not wish to know her? What has my poor aunt done to you?"

"Nothing at all," I replied indifferently. "I have given her no opportunity. I assure you, Captain Douglas, I have no offence to mention either on her part, or on that of Lady Constance."

"Nevertheless there is some under-current which you do not wish me to fathom. But I am sorry you do not care for Constance, because I think she desires to be your friend."

Was he, too, beginning this strain? I had tried to forget it, but now it was to come back, and from a quarter whence I least expected it.

"Bah!" I said angrily. "Do you think I will accept anyone's friendship in the form of charity?"

His face flushed very slightly, but sufficiently to be perceptible. He looked at me now, surprise and amusement upon his face.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "that is the light in which you regard your friends, is it?"

"No, indeed," I answered, already ashamed of my passionate speech. "I value my friends and all their acts of kindness; but oh——" and then I remembered her hidden motive, and the old misery came over me once more. I covered my face with my hands. "I cannot tell you," I said, with a little wail of pain, "I can't explain myself. I did love her dearly, I would love her now if I might, if I could."

He put out his left hand as he sat leaning forward in his chair, and drew my hands gently from before my face. At that touch I felt the electric current thrill through me, and suffered him to hold them in his own for one

moment. He looked at me steadily, but smiled as he did so.

"Whose blood have you in your veins?" he asked.

"My father's," I said proudly. "My poor, dear father, who would never suffer an obligation from anyone if he could possibly help it."

"Was his father's name Lucifer?" he asked, smiling.

"Ah, don't," I said, drawing away my hands pettishly, "you have no sympathy; I ought to have remembered that when I spoke to you."

He put his hand over mine again, and pressed it gently.

"I have sympathy," he said, "more sympathy than you suppose; I appreciate your pride, but it amuses me, nevertheless, to observe another aspect of your character."

"Are you not proud, then? Would you suffer yourself to be patronised and made to feel the favours bestowed upon you?"

"Surely Constance does not do this?"

"Yes, she does. Not consciously, perhaps, but I cannot help feeling so, nevertheless. It was she who told me of this situation; and I am glad I have it, for now I can be more independent of her."

"Then you may as well be angry with me, for I told her of it," he said in a lower voice.

I coloured a little.

"Oh, that is so different."

"You would not mind being under an obligation to me, then?"

"It depends upon the manner in which it was done. I am not angry with Lady Constance for that; not, indeed, annoyed at any single act of charity or kindness, but at the whole system; at the motives which prompt them."

"What are her motives?"

"That is what I will never say," I answered passionately. "Do not ask me, for I won't tell you."

He shook his head, though his eyes smiled.

"What a little spirit! You will need a good deal of breaking in, Madam, before any man can venture to marry you."

The words made me uneasy, and I shivered slightly, but the next moment I laughed.

"Perhaps I shall never marry anyone."

"Yes, you will, some day," he said significantly.

"You seem to know a great deal about my future."

The words were indifferent, but the voice was dry and the utterance unsteady.

"I know that much," he said confidently.

"Then I had better begin the breaking-in process directly," I answered, "and make myself in readiness before the time comes."

"And as I am an interested person, I may watch the progress of it, I suppose," he said, with meaning.

"It can make very little difference to you."

"It may make a very considerable difference,

to me," he said firmly, but looking into the fire again.

"How so? You may not see me in the years to come."

"May I not? But I will see you. Your life and mine must not lie apart."

His eyes glowed in the fire-light as the darkness of night began to fill the room. I felt cold and faint.

"What do you mean?" I whispered.

"That you shall learn some day, I hope." Then altering his tone, he added earnestly, "Ella, how can I let you go even for one fortnight? Promise me that you will come back to me, that you will not forget me?"

He put out his hand again, and I took it.

"I do promise!" I said fervently.

He lifted my cold fingers to his lips.

"Call me Claude, just once," he pleaded.

"I do promise, Claude," I whispered.

The darkness gathered thick and fast, and the children were playing in the fire-light.

"Come downstairs," I said abruptly, a minute afterwards; "Mamma will be waiting for tea."

I rose as I spoke, and the little ones ran towards me from the other end of the room where their favourite "mulberry-bush" had been going on. Captain Douglas rose also. There was an anxious look upon his face which I could not understand, and the words which fell from his lips under a muttered breath were still more inexplicable:

"Oh, God! how hard it is!"

I looked at him, half-frightened, and he saw it. Sending the children before him like a little flock of sheep, he paused once more; then taking my hand again, he said:

"My little Ella, will you trust me, come what may?"

"I will try," I answered, tears choking my voice, for I could not understand him.

"Trust me not at all, or all in all!" he whispered, as he drew me towards him. I felt his arm round me, his kiss pressed upon my

cheek; I heard a stifled prayer for "justice," which mystified me. Then I drew away, half frightened, but intoxicated with delight, for now I knew that he loved me!

## CHAPTER V.

### VISITING.

"We brake no gold, a sign
Of stronger faith to be;
But I wear his last look in my soul,
Which said, 'I love but thee.'"

*Mrs. Browning.*

I WAS back in the old home again—with new thoughts pervading me, new memories clinging round me, new hopes gleaming through the darkness of the future. Claude had declared his love for me, as truly as if he had asked my consent to marry him. There could be but one life before me—a life with him; for now that our love was known, no barrier could

separate us. I had as perfect confidence in him as I had in myself, and knew that we should hold to one another till death alone divided us; though there was no more bond between us than the trust which I had promised, and the love which he had too plainly shown. I expected no more. No letters were to pass between us; no open announcement of our engagement was to make it known to the outside world. I understood that at present it was a secret—a precious secret, to be carried far down in the recesses of our own hearts—and until the time should come to divulge it, I could not permit even my own mother to hear anything about it. Oh, golden fruit! hanging just above my head: it would surely ripen some day, and fall into my outstretched arms, so ready to receive it!

I had heard very little of Lady Constance during my stay at Wentworth, and had been too much occupied with my own affairs to dwell much upon the subject which had been

so painful. So far as I knew, matters had gone on much the same as usual at home; and if any rumours had reached my mother's ears, at least she had not betrayed them. To all appearance she had consented to Mildred's adoption by Lady Constance, had even appeared anxious for it, though there seemed no more intimacy between them than there had ever been. I longed to ask whether she had visited at Milford since Mildred had taken up her abode there, or if she had permitted the ceremony of a call upon herself which she, at one time, had appeared to resent. But I could gather none of these details from herself. She seemed to have grown even more quiet and sad than in the old days, perhaps because she had been now completely alone for a few months; perhaps—which I dreaded more—she knew of my father's intimacy with Lady Constance. I wondered if there was any ill-feeling between herself and the lady, and what their conduct would be to each other if they came in contact.

The fulfilment of my conjectures was nearer at hand than I supposed.

One afternoon I offered to accompany my mother upon a visit to Jemmie Browning, who had been ill with consumption for many months. My father had ordered milk and beef-tea for the little sufferer, as well as other kinds of nourishment, which his mother found it difficult to procure, she being a hard-working woman with a numerous family. He was a dear little boy about nine years old, who had been sickly from his birth; and as my father had interested us in his case, we rarely went empty-handed when paying him one of our numerous visits.

As we approached the turning which led to the cottage my father's carriage came round the corner, but he was apparently so much absorbed in the newspaper which he was perusing that he did not see us, though I nodded and waved my hand in token of recognition. We walked along the row of small cottages,

admiring the clean doorsteps and clear muslin blinds which gave so cheerful an aspect to the exterior, till we came to the house in which the sick child lived, and pushing open the door, walked in. Someone was standing within the room, speaking to the little boy, who was lying on his rude couch, supported by pillows. She turned her head; it was Lady Constance. My mother had followed closely behind me, but Lady Constance either did not see, or would not look at her, as she offered her hand to me. I held out mine, and said rather stiffly:

"How do you do, Lady Constance?" Then seeing that she did not speak to my mother, I added: "This is my mother; I believe you do not know her?"

To my surprise, my mother's usually pale face had flushed crimson; she did not speak, but came timidly forward as if not knowing how she would be received. Lady Constance held out her hand, but said very coldly, and

in a manner quite unlike that in which she usually acknowledged me or my father:

"How do you do, Mrs. Hamilton?"

She barely extended the tips of her fingers, and my heart beat wildly with anger and rage.

"She hates her," I said to myself; "she hates her for loving my father!"

I was in such a tumult of passion and anger that I almost turned my back upon her. What did it matter to me who she was, if she could treat my own dear mother so, while stealing her husband away from her? Cruel, wicked woman! I hated her.

But she did not utter another word to either of us. She only said, "Good morning, Mrs. Browning; I am glad to have seen Jemmie, and perhaps, as you have other visitors, it is as well I should go now," and she passed out of the cottage.

Mrs. Browning was then all fussiness and civility. She dusted a chair with her apron, and begged that my mother would be seated,

and hoped Miss Hamilton was not tired carrying that 'eavy basket. She didn't know what she would do without our goodness.

"And our dear Doctor, too," she added; "no one knows what he is in time of need, except those as has him."

"He has just been here, has he not?" I asked, eyeing the woman as if she, too, were a party to this wicked plot.

"Yes, Miss, he 've just gone," she answered. "I wonder you didn't meet him."

"We did," said my mother, "driving round the corner."

"Yes," said the woman; "him and her ladyship come in just about the same time. She was in her carriage, and him in his. Law! we did think ourselves grand folks to 'ave two such fine carriages afore the door; didn't us, Jemmie?"

"Yes," was the feeble reply.

"We didn't see Lady Constance's carriage, did we Ella?" asked my mother.

"No," said the woman; "it was drivin' up and down, I think. I 'eard her tell the coachman to drive up and down a bit."

"Dear me," said my mother, "I hope we didn't send her away."

"Oh, laws, no, Ma'am," answered the woman; "bless you, she was just a-goin'. She 'd been 'ere above 'alf an hour."

"Readin' to me," added Jemmie.

"Yes, and she do read so beautiful," said the woman; "it does one's 'art good to 'ear her, it does, all about little children and 'ow Jesus Christ loves 'em; and then she speaks so, Jemmie thinks she 's a'most like an angel herself, don't ye, Jem?"

"An angel of darkness," I whispered to myself; "all the worse because she is so fair."

"Yes, and she comes here, and speaks so gentle," continued the woman, "you 'd think he was her own child, you would. Ah! she 's quality and no mistake; there 's no airs nor graces

about her. Jemmie, you loves 'er ladyship, don't ye, my boy?"

"Yes," said the child.

"Yes," said my mother, perhaps thinking that we ought to say something, "I am sure she is very good."

I resolutely avoided the subject, and in order to change it, opened my little basket and gave Jemmie some fruit which I had brought with me. I thought my mother must indeed be good if she could acknowledge the worth of Lady Constance after her treatment of her, but I would not be so hypocritical as to echo her. After paying a short visit we said good-bye to the mother and child, and turned homewards. I was determined not to mention the subject which was rankling in my breast, but my mother spared me the trouble by introducing it herself, and in a manner which was totally unexpected.

"Well, I must say, Ella, you were not very civil to her ladyship this afternoon,"

she said, as soon as we had gone a few yards.

I bit my lip.

"Really, Mother, I did not know it. I surely did as much as was necessary."

"Well, it wasn't necessary for you to turn your back on her," said my mother; "and she saw it, for she looked at you, and then went towards the door."

"I am glad of it," I said bitterly.

"What! glad of being rude? Well, Ella, I am ashamed of you."

"Not of being rude," I answered, "for I don't consider I was rude; but I won't stand Lady Constance's treatment."

"Treatment? what treatment?" echoed my mother.

"Well, her treatment of you, for instance," I said angrily. "Why can't she behave properly to you if she wishes to know us?"

"Oh, as to that," said my mother, indifferently, "I care very little about it. She treats

me quite as well as I either desire or expect; that does not trouble me."

But I was sure it did trouble her, in spite of the brave manner in which she tried to conceal it. There was an inflexion of pride in her voice, and the thought troubled me that there was a reason for it.

"But it troubles me," I said bluntly. "Why should she be friendly with the rest of us, and invite us to her house, if she does not include you also in the invitations?"

"Because she possibly knows that I would not go."

Was this true? and had my mother substantial reasons for not wishing to know her? Alas! I knew it too well; but was it possible that she did?

"I am surprised, then, that you consented so willingly to Mildred's going to live with her," I said. "I cannot quite understand your putting yourself under an obligation to her if you are upon such terms that

you hardly notice one another when you meet."

"I do it for the child's good," said my mother, with the same strange pride in her tone, "not from any good which I expect to derive myself," and then she was silent.

Directly after, she changed the subject to one which was almost equally uncongenial.

"You have heard of this offer to Agnes, I suppose, Ella?"

"Yes," I answered, my eyes flashing angrily. "Isn't it an atrocious business?"

"We need not trouble ourselves much about it," said my mother. "Of course she will not have him."

"No, of course not!" I replied. "Does she know about it?"

"Yes," said my mother; "your father named it to her when she came home, and then wrote his answer to Mr. Thorburn."

"I am glad of that," I said, relieved, "for now I hope we shall hear no more of it."

"I hope not," said my mother quietly; "but you must not let it make any difference in your behaviour towards them, Ella. Remember, Mr. Thorburn is an important member of the town now. He is an alderman, may perhaps be mayor soon, and the proprietor of a newspaper."

"An illiterate creature like that!" I said contemptuously.

"Oh, he is not such a very ill-educated man," said my mother; "and besides, I don't quite like the tone you adopt towards the family, Ella."

"Very well, Mother," I said, recovering my temper, "I will be as polite as it is possible to be the very next time I see them, and endeavour to conceal all my true opinion of Mr. Thorburn and his son George."

I felt that I could afford to be gracious now for the short time that I was likely to see them as acquaintances. When I became Claude's wife there must be a cessation of intercourse,

and that happy time was fast approaching. These people would not then dare to thrust themselves upon us in the manner they were doing, and rank with us as equals. I did not know how soon my conduct would be put to the test, for we had barely time to lay aside our walking things, when a message was brought up to us that Mrs. Thorburn and her daughters were below. It was some satisfaction to know that they had forgiven us for Agnes' behaviour to George, and in answer to my appeal, "Agnes, do come downstairs; those people are here, and we must be polite to them," she descended the stairs with her dignity unruffled, and we entered the drawing-room together.

We found the four seated in a row, card-cases in hand, and evidently "got up" to do the thing in style. Mrs. Thorburn rose and approached me, kissing me with her usual warmth, but the girls were a little less affectionate, although they saluted me upon the

cheek which I graciously offered to them. I took it as a hopeful sign, and was interested to watch whether the same courtesy was extended to Agnes. But she had already seated herself beside Kate, and was talking with the calm dignity that was usual to her.

Mrs. Thorburn fidgeted about on her seat as if the best silk dress in which she had arrayed herself was likely to suffer from being too long in the same position, and after descanting upon the impertinence of one of her servants, and the difficulties she found in her new housekeeping, she turned to me, and smiling blandly, said:

"And how do you like your situation, love?"

My cheeks tingled. So this was the line they took. They were the great people now, and I was only a governess whom they condescended to notice. Mrs. Thorburn's manner showed it plainly, although the gentle little woman tried to speak in a conciliatory tone.

I drew up my head proudly.

"Very much, thanks," I uttered carelessly, and with as much indifference as I could assume.

"I'm glad of that, I'm sure," said this inoffensively offensive person, "for it must be hard for you to be eating other people's bread. As I often tell my girls, they don't know the time when it may come to one of themselves, to any of us in fact." And she heaved a sigh of compassion.

"Law, Ma, don't croak so," said Annie. "We might be very glad to have such a good home over our heads, without looking at the future in that way. You must come and see us, Ella, now that we are in the new house."

I think she meant to be kind and to turn off her mother's speech, which she might have supposed was wanting in tact. She probably saw the flush which had dyed my cheek and lent a tinge of colour to my very throat.

She knew my proud nature, and her penetration went farther than her mother's, which, perhaps, after all, need not have gone very deep to see that I was wounded. I tried to put a good face on the matter, however, and to steer a middle course between pride and condescension.

"I will come some day," I answered. "I suppose you are quite settled now?"

"Pretty well," said Mrs. Thorburn; "but it do take a long time to get settled, that it does, indeed. Law, I never knew half the trouble that moving would be till we tried it." Here followed a long history of the many difficulties which this troublesome change of condition had involved. How the carpets had not arrived till some time after they were ordered, and then would not fit when they did arrive; how the pier-glass had been broken on its way from London, and had to be replaced by another; and so on. The account of these disasters took a long time to relate, and

when it was finished it was almost time to take their departure. At last they rose, Mrs. Thorburn gathering her Paisley shawl together, and cordially shaking hands with my mother.

"By the bye," she said, suddenly turning to Annie, "what have you done with the card? you 've got it, haven't you?"

"No, Ma," said Kate, simpering; "you put it in your pocket, don't you remember?"

"Oh, did I?" said the mother, recovering herself. "Well to be sure—to think of my forgetting, now!" and raising her dress she dived into the recesses of a deep pocket, mysteriously placed between the folds of her ample stuff petticoat. Then fishing up first a bunch of keys, and then a purse, she produced an old, well-worn pocket-book, from which she took a card with "Mr. Thorburn" engraved in large letters upon it.

"I hope, Ella, my dear, that you will excuse Mr. Thorburn's not calling upon you. He

never pays visits, but this will remind you that he is happy to see you whenever you like to come and see us."

"Thank you," I said in a formal voice.

She pushed the card into my hand with a good-humoured nod and an injunction "not to forget," and then they trooped out again, she leading the way, while the three girls followed her.

My mother looked a little uncomfortable after they had left, and silence followed their departure. Doubtless she remembered the morning when I had incurred her anger by expressing my opinion of Mrs. Thorburn. I did not wish to vex her, and thought that it was not worth while to show my resentment of these favours which she herself must regard in the same light as I did.

"We must go and see them soon, Agnes," I said cheerfully. "Let me see, shall we go on Monday?"

"By all means," said Agnes, who generally

understood a hint. "Perhaps, mother, you will come too?"

"Perhaps, my dear, if I can. But you had better do so in any case. I think they would like it."

But on Monday my mother had one of the severe headaches from which she had suffered so much lately, and after dinner went up to her own room, where she lay down with darkened windows and closed doors, requesting that she might not be disturbed. I was disappointed, for I rather dreaded the prospect of meeting Mr. Thorburn, and her presence would have been some protection. I was afraid of myself, fearful that I should resent his patronising manner, and so incur his wrath, which would alarm me, and yet anxious not to put myself upon too familiar a footing. We agreed to dress ourselves in our best clothes, and to pay the call with as much ceremony as they had done.

"Agnes," I said, laughing, "what fun it

would be to send in our cards. They would think it the latest fashion, and adopt it the next time they came to see us."

We walked up through the small garden with its carriage-drive, forming a crescent in front of the house, and gave a loud peal at the bell. I was almost ashamed of having rung so loudly; but we waited some minutes before any notice was taken of it, and I was just thinking that I might make a second attempt, when the voice of Mr. Thorburn was heard shouting through the hall.

"William! William! don't you hear that bell ringing, you lout? What are you doing down there? Marianne! Cook!—where the deuce have they all got to?"

Agnes made a comical face at me, and I answered it with:

"So they have got a William in addition to Marianne and the cook. I wonder what he is

sure I don't," said Agnes indiffe-

rently; "but I wish they would open the door."

She had hardly pronounced the words when we heard a loud tramping of heavy boots across the hall, with Mr. Thorburn's voice sounding again, "What do you come up making that noise for? Where 's your slippers?" and then a door was heard to slam heavily, and the one at which we were standing opened.

A boy of about fourteen presented himself before us, with very grimy hands and a striped jacket which was much too large for him. In order to accommodate it to his figure he had turned up his sleeves, showing a patch of red wrist beneath. His hair looked as if it had not been brushed for a considerable time, though it was plastered with hair-oil which sent forth a fragrant odour, and he had evidently been eating onions. He seemed as if it had caused him considerable exertion to get to the door, for he panted prodigiously, which improved the flavour of the onions for us. To

our question whether Mrs. Thorburn was at home he hesitated, and then said he would "see."

We waited for another minute, shivering, while he bawled in a hoarse whisper down the kitchen stairs to inquire whether "Missus had gone out," and a discussion followed between the cook and housemaid, in which the cook declared her conviction that she had "seed her only a minute afore with her bonnet on," which statement Marianne contradicted by declaring that Cook must have had a drop too much beer, for that was Miss Annie. Fortunately for us, Marianne came off the winner, and we were at length admitted. I drew a card from my case, and presented it to the page with great gravity.

"Will you have the goodness to give her my card?"

He stared at me as if he had never seen such a thing before in his life; then he said:

"What 's it for?"

"To give to Mrs. Thorburn," I said, biting my lips with amusement.

"Oh, then you can just give her the ticket ye'self, Mum; you 'll see her in a minute. She won't be long, I daresay."

So my little plan was frustrated, and I had to pocket the card again.

We were shown upstairs into a gaudily-furnished drawing-room, in which the predominant colour was yellow. A number of heavy ornaments stood upon the mantel-piece, and a round table in the middle, with books upon it, was surrounded by the table-border of which I had heard. A gold and white paper on the wall, with very large floral designs, was covered with some heavy-looking oil paintings in massive frames, in two of which we could recognise the mild features of Mrs. Thorburn, and the more dignified and commanding figure of her lord and master. They had evidently been taken recently, and had a new look about them, as had everything else in the room, even to the

fire-irons, which, Agnes suggested mischievously, were probably George's latest design. It seemed as if Mrs. Thorburn was anxious that we should take in all these details, for we waited for some time before she made her appearance, and as the room had no fire in it we shivered considerably. There had evidently been something going on just before we came, for the chairs and sofa-covers were thrown into a heap in one corner, and only one shutter was unfastened. The hearth-rug still lay rolled up before the fire-place, as if its brilliant colours were not often exposed to the light, and the curtains were pinned up. Presently the soft rustle of a dress was heard outside the door, and Mrs. Thorburn entered with Helen. She glanced round the room, and then said:

"Law, my dears, are you sitting without a fire? Why, you must be starved!"

Of course we repudiated the idea, but our kind hostess told Helen to ring the bell, in

spite of our remonstrance, and the young lady having obeyed her with some dignity, the red-handed boy made his appearance again.

"William," said Mrs. Thorburn, "just bring a match and put to the fire, will you?"

The boy disappeared, and returned with a box of matches, and after striking one or two ineffectually, succeeded at length in obtaining a light, which he applied to the shavings. They burned slowly for a moment and then went out, leaving us with less prospect of a fire than before.

"Dear, dear! how provoking!" said Mrs. Thorburn in a hopeless tone; "you 'll have to come down to the dining-room, my dears. There 's a good fire there, for I 've been at work myself since dinner."

She then explained to us that they were expecting friends that evening, and apologised for the state of the drawing-room, which had evidently been half disrobed for the occasion. "But I am glad that you have seen it," she

said with pride; "for it's a pretty room, and almost everything is new."

We made our way downstairs to the dining-room, and surprised Mr. Thorburn in the middle of a nap over his newspaper. I was afraid that he resented the intrusion; for though he accepted our apology by muttering "Oh, it don't matter," in rather a sleepy tone, it was evident that something had disturbed the tranquillity of his mind. He did not rise from his seat as we entered, but suffered us to shake hands without moving from his lounging attitude. His hair was very untidy, perhaps caused by the sudden removal of the handkerchief which had been thrown over it; his shirt-front was soiled, his feet in slippers. Altogether his appearance was not prepossessing; but though my anger rose at sight of his ill-breeding and want of courtesy, I was still anxious to put as good a face on the matter as was possible.

"So you've come home," he said abruptly

to me. "How long are you going to stay?"

"A fortnight," I answered cheerfully, trying to tone my voice into as conciliatory a strain as I could. But the answer did not appear to have given much satisfaction, for his next remark was:

"Oh, indeed. That's very kind of you; very condescendin' to come and see a set of snobs like us."

I felt startled. I could not understand this change of manner; but fearful of showing resentment I continued by remarking upon the comfort of the house, ignoring his speech altogether.

"Umph! You like it, do you? Well, I think so myself. Snobs has sometimes as good opinions as other folks, you see."

Hereupon he chuckled as if the joke were a good one.

I flushed with anger, though a vague fear stole over me. To what could Mr. Thorburn

be alluding? Was it possible that my intemperate speech, made in the privacy of a letter to my father, could have become known to him? Surely my father could not have spoken of it. Surely—could it be? had my mother seen the letter and repeated its contents? That, too, must be impossible. I turned to Mrs. Thorburn, and began to talk very fast.

"I suppose you feel quite settled now," I said; "but it must take a long time to become so."

"Yes; we're as settled as if we'd been used to it all our days," answered her husband for her. "We like our comforts, and small blame to us if we don't take 'em when we can get 'em."

"Certainly," I replied, not knowing what else to say. "How is the greenhouse looking?"

"If you want to know you'd better go and see for yourself," was the reply in the same manner as before. "Here, Kate, you can take 'em."

We rose to take advantage of this gracious offer, and followed Kate, who had at that moment entered the room. Glad of any relief which freed us from this intolerable conversation, we remained for some minutes within the greenhouse, admiring and asking questions, all of which I took care to do loud enough for Mr. Thorburn's ears. But my heart was troubled nevertheless. I seemed to have no security against this odious man, if even the letters which I wrote to my father were to come to his knowledge in this manner. It puzzled and distressed me considerably, and I lost no time in appealing to my father upon the subject. I was almost convinced, from the manner in which Mr. Thorburn expressed himself, that he was playing upon my own words; but when I said so to my father, he seemed as much in perplexity as I.

"I cannot understand it," he said. "To my knowledge that letter has not left my

pocket, and I have not shown it to your mother nor mentioned its contents to her."

Then it was more and more strange. Was the world all falsity and deceit? Could marplots and deceivers be already surrounding my path and hemming me in with their wiles and stratagems? And was my own mother one of these? Alas! I could not tell.

## CHAPTER VI.

### AGNES RECEIVES AN OFFER.

"If you wish to marry suitably, marry your equal."
*Ovid.*

UPON my return to our own house after the visit we had just paid, I found a little note in Lady Constance's clear, bold handwriting, inviting me to go out to Milford the next day, and stay for a night. My heart fluttered at the thought. I had only seen her twice since my return, once when I had so far overcome my prejudice as to drive there for the sake of seeing Mildred, and once when we had met in Mrs. Browning's cottage in the manner I have

already described. Millie had been to see me more than once; the fresh, simple, pretty child already beginning to develop into the calm maiden of maturer years. But even for the sake of being with her, my pride would not allow me to accept another such invitation as I had often received. After Lady Constance's behaviour towards my mother, I had declared to myself angrily that her civilities should be rejected. I would go no more to Milford House till our intimacy was based on a footing in which my mother could participate.

And yet here I was wavering again at the first opportunity. I could forego the pleasure of meeting with Mildred; I was willing to show my resentment of the polite and apparently kind note which accompanied the invitation; but I could not resist the temptation of a possible meeting with Captain Douglas. He had said that he should be at Milford during my brief holiday, and he had sufficient tact to arrange a plan by means of which he should

see me, without doing it in so apparent a manner that other people could understand it.

My mother was still very unwell, suffering constantly and severely from neuralgia, and weakened in both mind and body. That excuse alone was sufficient to prevent my accepting an invitation to stay till the next day, and it was with some feeling of pride that I answered Lady Constance's note by informing her that such an arrangement was impossible; that if she were good enough to send the carriage for me immediately after luncheon, I might stay for an hour with Mildred, but that I must return early on account of my mother's health. I read the note over afterwards, taking credit to myself for the manner in which I had expressed my regard for my mother, and the obvious motive which had prompted me to accept the invitation at all. I hoped that she would see this and understand it.

I found upon my arrival that Lady Constance's mother was staying with her, the

same lady that I had seen in the carriage with the grave, sweet face, and white hair. Her hair had that peculiar tinge of whiteness which showed that it must have been fair in her youth, probably the same as her daughter's, and the blue eyes were even bluer than the large expressive eyes of Lady Constance. I was a little taken aback when I saw her, and remembered my conversation with my father about Lady Constance's relations; but the old lady's greeting was nearly as warm as that which her daughter had bestowed upon me the first day I had seen her, and though I was pointedly stiff and constrained with both, she spoke as kindly as if my manner were unnoticed. I was determined to show my hostess that this visit was not intended for her, and made my way as quickly as possible to Mildred's room, which was fitted up with every possible comfort for that young lady's use.

"Spoilt child," I ejaculated, sinking down upon a cushioned ottoman in the window,

and drawing her head fondly towards me; "do you mean to say this is where you have your lessons?"

"Yes," said Mildred; "isn't it pretty? Do you know, Ella, I sometimes wonder now how I could have put up with our old bedroom at home with its patches of carpet tripping one up at every step."

A pang went to my heart. Alas and alas! it had been my own feeling too often, but I could not bear to hear it now from Mildred's lips.

"Oh, Millie, darling," I said earnestly, "do not cease to love your home, in spite of all these luxuries. Depend upon it, there is no other place like it."

Her arms were round me in a moment.

"Ella," she said with loving reproach, "I do love it with all my heart, and everyone in it; but Mammy best of all."

There was a falter in her voice which made the tears spring to my own eyes. I wondered

if she knew and noted the behaviour of her benevolent patroness, and what effect it had upon her; but with all my impulsiveness, I was reserved upon this subject. Mildred should never learn from me the bitter experience which the last few months had brought to me.

Lying thus with her head resting against my shoulder, we talked much of the home life past and present. I told her of my mother's headaches, of her depression of spirits, for which I could only account by the loneliness of her life lately, and of Agnes' return from school, which I hoped would cheer her. We were startled at length by a shower of small pebbles rattling against the window; and turning, I saw Captain Douglas below on the terrace, looking up at us.

"Oh, there 's Captain Douglas!" cried Mildred joyfully, indicating upon her fingers that he was "to come up." "How nice he is, Ella! I really quite love him—I wish you would marry him some day."

"Nonsense, child," I said, laughing and springing up from the seat upon which I was reclining. "I am never going to marry, Millie. I shall be an old maid always, and take care of my sisters."

Mildred's attention was too much taken up by observing whether her summons were obeyed, to give me any answer, and in another moment Captain Douglas had made his appearance.

"Well, Mildred," he said, coming in, and speaking in his hearty, jovial voice; "you 've got your sister, have you? Now I do hope you are happy at last."

"Very happy," answered Mildred, "and so is she. Are you not, Ella?"

"Very," I answered briefly, my cold fingers lingering for one moment within his warm hand.

He looked at me searchingly.

"Quite?" he asked; "quite happy?"

"Quite," I answered in the same brief manner.

"I am glad of that; are not you, Mildred?"

"Yes," said Mildred warmly, "of course I am."

"How long are you going to stay here?" said Captain Douglas again.

"About an hour, I believe," I replied. "My mother is not well, I must go home soon."

"Are you not going to remain till to-morrow?"

"No, I cannot do that."

"He did not answer except by a low whistle of an air which I knew well, the first refrain of "Si tu savais," and then he walked towards the mantel-piece. At this crisis Mildred suddenly darted out of the room, leaving me, for five minutes, alone in his company. For the first two, nothing was said. I looked out of the window, and he at the picture above him over the chimney. Then I summoned courage and ventured to ask after the inmates at Wentworth.

"I did not come to talk about that," he said,

after answering my questions with due ceremony, "I came to know how you are."

"I have already told you," I said, with averted face as he turned his own towards me.

"And what have you done for these last ten days without me?" he asked, looking at me boldly, while I shrank from his gaze, and tried to look out of the window.

"I have made myself happy," I replied, with a sorry attempt at indifference, "as you doubtless have also."

"I should not be so rude as to say so, however relieved I might feel at your absence," he said in the same tone.

I glanced quickly at him.

"No, and you would not imply it, I am sure; therefore I will not think so."

"When are you coming home?" he asked abruptly.

"Next week, I suppose," I answered in a similar manner

"You are coming then—for certain? You will not put it off?"

"Do you want me?" I asked shyly.

"Yes."

That was all he said, all he had any opportunity of saying. Mildred ran in to announce four o'clock tea in the drawing-room, and a request from Lady Constance that I would come downstairs. By the time that was over, it was dark and miserable without, and in spite of her entreaty that I should remain for the night, I took my departure, my kiss to Mildred being my warmest token of regard for any member of that household. And yet as I sat in the carriage I held the hand which he had touched, and even pressed it to my own lips because its touch seemed to impart a sense of him whose inner being was so strangely mingling with my own. I was almost sorry to find that the cold, cheerless drive had come to an end, for day-dreams are very delightful at nineteen. I came into the house shivering with cold, and

went at once upstairs to my mother. She was still suffering, but roused up at sight of me, and inquired eagerly for Mildred. I told her all my adventures, so far as I could, and begged her, if possible, to join our family circle, which, consisting of only Agnes and myself, was not a very large one. But this she refused to do. She preferred the quiet of her own room, and thought that it would only increase her malady if she ventured downstairs, where draughts were prevalent, and a certain amount of excitement unavoidable. To this last excuse I turned a deaf ear, laughing at what seemed a complete mockery of the usual state of our quiet household.

But we were to have more excitement that evening than even my mother dreamt of. Agnes and I had scarcely sat down to our seven o'clock tea when a loud peal at the bell announced the arrival of a visitor, and a minute or two later George Thorburn was ushered in by our little maid-servant.

My father was still abroad, my mother lying down in her room. Our friend George entered without ceremony, a self-satisfied smile playing about his mouth.

"Good evening," he said, with easy familiarity, nodding to both of us. "I've just come in time, I see. I suppose I may make one of the party, though, as the saying is, 'two 's company and three 's none.' That 's not the case here, though, I hope." And he proceeded to divest himself of his overcoat without invitation.

I glanced at Agnes in the vain hope of reading a response in her face, but no thought could be conjectured from that calm impassive expression. She merely said "Good evening," and left the rest of the conversation to me.

"Did you wish to see my father?" I asked coldly.

"No, thanks; my visit is to the young ladies."

"You are very kind," I answered, with a

slightly perceptible sneer, while Agnes rose to fill the teapot with boiling water.

"Here, let me do that," said our gallant visitor, rising to his feet; "that kettle is much too heavy for your little hands." And I noticed the manner in which he endeavoured to take it from her.

Agnes extricated her fingers from his grasp, and held the teapot open while he performed the operation of filling it, but all this time she did not speak save in monosyllables, though she knew his insipid gaze was upon her, noting, as it were, every expression. I do not think, however, that he gained much information from that inanimate face, under whose calmness I flattered myself that I alone read her inner feelings. The small mouth was compressed tightly, the hazel eyes looked straight before her, apparently unconscious of his admiration. The conversation was kept up chiefly by himself, our share in it consisting of brief answers to his remarks, as he drew a chair to the table

and began to cut the bread, regardless of our behaviour towards him.

"What jolly tea you make!" he said at length, pushing up his cup for a second supply. "After all, there's nothing like the cup which cheers but don't inebriate."

"I am glad you like it," she said quietly.

"Yes, I do, and no mistake, when it's made by such fair hands. I say, what a jolly thing it would be if a fellow had a wife like you who could always make it for him."

The blush which overspread my cheek must have been much more perceptible than any change in Agnes' countenance, but he was too much absorbed with looking at her to take any notice. No answer came from her lips. Her small straight nose was, perhaps, elevated a trifle higher than usual, but she was at that moment occupied in the task of helping herself to butter, and the remark remained unheeded.

I began to wonder how long he intended to stay. I could not doubt the purpose for which

he had come, but he could not make a proposal in my presence, and I was determined to remain in the room as long as he should, so as to frustrate his object.

But alas! the fates were not propitious to my scheme. I had scarcely finished my tea before I received a summons from my mother, and going upstairs, found that it was time to give her the medicine which had been left for her by my father. In answer to her question concerning our visitor I told her that George Thorburn was downstairs, but she was either too ill or too disinclined to comment upon the unusual circumstance, and I was in too great fear of prolonging my departure by entering into the disagreeable subject. She seemed very weak, and I fancied that there were traces of recent tears upon her cheeks, which distressed me. I longed to stay with her, but came to the conclusion that, after all, perfect quiet was her best remedy. Besides, my presence was required downstairs, for who could tell what

George Thorburn might not even then be saying? As soon as I could leave her with a clear conscience, I managed to make my escape, but though only ten minutes had elapsed since I left the dining-room, I saw, by the faces of both, that the fatal words had been spoken. Agnes sat very still, her lips rigidly closed, her hand nervously playing with a knife upon the table; and George Thorburn looked more ill at ease than I had ever before seen him. I sat down in silence, looking stealthily from one to the other, but neither spoke, and for some minutes nothing was audible but the ticking of the old clock on the stairs. But during that interval my mind was being roused up to its highest pitch, and I felt that when George Thorburn broke the silence my answer should be ready for him.

"Look here," he said suddenly, wheeling himself round on his chair with a jerk, and balancing it on two legs, "don't you think this is an awful sell, Miss Ella? Here have I been

telling your sister how I worship the ground she treads on, and have for years, and she don't see it—or won't, seemingly."

He grasped the back of his chair with both arms, and stared at me with a face at once sulky and defiant. I drew myself up proudly, looking full into the lowering face, with its dogged, unpleasant expression. I was ready for action now, too ready, perhaps, as I said with quivering lips and dilated nostrils:

"You are very good, Mr. George Thorburn, to have taken the trouble to adore the ground upon which my sister treads. Perhaps you will remember that that is your proper position towards her. Do not presume to lift yourself to a higher level."

His face darkened with a look of more terrible rage than even I had assumed, as he brought down the chair with a sudden noise, and glared at me out of his crockery-blue eyes.

"Well, upon my word!" he said; "that's

nice language. I 'd like to know what you mean, Miss Hamilton?"

"What I say!" I replied with flashing eyes; "that for you to aspire to the hand of my father's daughter is insufferable presumption, and, as such, deserves to be resented."

"Hush, Ella!" implored Agnes, looking uneasily at me.

"No, I will not!" I said passionately. "How dare you, Mr. Thorburn, the son of an ironmonger, venture to address my sister in this manner? Have the goodness to leave us this moment, and never presume to enter the house again upon such terms."

He rose at once, his face working with passion.

"By——! you shall suffer for this!" he muttered between his teeth. "You stuck-up proud minx, who hasn't as much money as would keep me and my father in shoe leather; who have to work to put bread into your mouth. What do you mean by your father

and your father's position? Let me tell you that whatever his position was, it's gone now; that my father could soon make it too hot for him in Halton if he was to tell all he could tell about him, and that we're as good as you or him any day, and a deal more respected, maybe. You'd better mind what you're saying when you begin to talk about positions. You had better hold your tongue, let me tell you, about us ironmongers."

With that, he took up his hat, which he put on, while he jerked his arms defiantly into his great-coat, brandishing them as he did so, as if he would like to strike me with his clenched hands. Then walking towards the door, he said mockingly:

"I wish you a very good evening. A merry Christmas, and many of 'em!"

We heard the door bang heavily after him, his receding footsteps sounded faint and fainter down the quiet street, and then Agnes turned towards me with a white miserable face.

"Ella, Ella!" she said earnestly; "what have you done by your wild, intemperate words?"

I was excited and overcome, and frightened too, by the effect of my passion. I burst into tears, covering my face with my hands, as if the action could screen from my memory the closing speech of this revengeful man. But Agnes sat calmly before me, the paleness of her face alone indicating the mental struggle from which she was suffering.

"I can't help it," I cried at last, unwilling to own myself wrong, "Those people exasperate—they madden me. If they don't know their position, they must be told it. I won't be treated with familiarity, and patronised by their vulgarity. Now, at any rate, they know my opinion."

"But at what a price?" said Agnes calmly. "How do you know how our father may not suffer for it?"

"That is nonsense," I said briefly, though

inwardly my heart fluttered with trepidation.

"Indeed it is not nonsense," said Agnes. "You know Mr. Thorburn's disposition. You know that he is a violent and a revengeful man; and, worse than all, you know—Oh, Ella!—you know that he has some nameless hold over us from which we cannot free ourselves."

"No, I do not know it," I answered doggedly; "I only know what George has said now, and he was in a passion and did not care what language he chose. If he likes to think that they are bigger people in Halton than we are, let him do so. I will not contradict him so long as he lets us alone. What do you suppose his object is in wishing to marry you? Not because he loves you, assuredly, but because by so doing he hopes to strengthen his position. That is the true motive, with all his bragging."

"I do not doubt it," said Agnes; "but still he would not speak of secrets which his father

knows unless he was confident of his position, and it is that which makes me fear. You know how both Father and Mother have always begged us to be kind and polite to them, and I have tried to be so for their sake, for I felt sure that there was some reason beyond a mere liking for them."

"Yes, I know you have," I answered. "I have been surprised to observe it often, because it has been so unlike my own conduct. But I never thought of it in that light—never, never!"

I wrung my hands uneasily at the bare suspicion of Mr. Thorburn—that odious man—having indeed the power to disgrace my father in the eyes of Halton. Was it, could it be, my own terrible secret which even then I could not disclose to Agnes? Or was it something in the far-off time, before I awoke to consciousness, or knew that evil dwelt hand in hand with good? I sat contemplating these questions, the tears still coursing down my cheeks,

when the rattle of the little trap was heard outside, and my father made his appearance.

He came in rubbing his hands as if he were glad to exchange the warmth of the inner air for that which he had left outside.

"Well, my dears," he said cheerfully, "have you left any tea for me?" Then seeing my woe-begone tear-stained face, he looked at me with some surprise, and asked if I had been crying.

"Yes," said Agnes, "she has, and about me. I am going upstairs, and then she can tell you about it."

She went away, and he soon followed her, going to wash his hands and speak to my mother before he sat down to his evening meal. Meanwhile I busied myself in preparations for his dinner, trying, in my endeavours to have all as comfortable as possible, to keep away disagreeable thoughts. When he returned I told him as briefly as I could of George Thorburn's visit, and of the manner in which

I had spoken to him, adding, as an excuse for my conduct, that his coming here at all in the manner he did was a liberty which I was bound to resent.

My father listened patiently, gravely condemning me at the end of my story for the part I had played in it, as Agnes had done. I was anxious to justify myself, and appealed to him for his opinion, suppressing at the same time the threats which George Thorburn had made use of. But though his face showed signs of an inward trouble, his manner was calm as usual.

"You must be careful how you annoy and wound other people's feelings, Ella," he said gravely. "Mr. Thorburn considers himself an important person in the town now, and probably does not look at his son's proposal in the same light that you regard it."

"Nevertheless he is a snob, as I said before," I answered angrily; "a low, vulgar person, without brains, without the common

sense necessary to show him that he is our inferior."

My father tried to smile, a sickly smile though it was, as he said with a faint attempt at playfulness:

"You seem to have had a wide experience of snobs, my child."

I looked at the white tired face and sighed, as I thought that, perhaps, these people, by their annoyance, were the cause of it. Suddenly a new idea seized my mind, and according to my impulsive nature, I acted upon it.

"Father, dear," I exclaimed, "why do you not leave Halton? why not begin a new life in some other place, away from the Thorburns, away from so many disagreeables?"

He laid his hand fondly upon my head as I knelt beside him, and looked into my upturned face.

"Ella, you are a child still," he said. "How can I leave this place? Can I begin over again at my time of life?"

"You might exchange a practice with someone," I said confidently.

"That is not so easily done as you suppose," he said; "and if you think that my doing so will enable me to get rid of the Thorburns, you are quite mistaken. Mr. Thorburn knows of certain circumstances connected with my life, circumstances of which he would make use were it to suit his purpose to do so."

"I know it," I murmured. "George hinted that much this evening, but I cannot understand how that need affect you."

My father sat upright and looked at me.

"What did he say?" he asked sternly.

"I hardly know now," I answered, a shiver passing over my frame. "He was in a passion, and, perhaps, would not have said so much had it been otherwise. But he said that if his father named all that he could about you, that he might make it too hot for you here." I cast down my eyes, while my face alternately

flushed and paled. "Please don't let us think of what the creature said."

"Ah!" said my father, drawing a deep breath, "that is the line that he takes, is it? I thought as much."

He sat silent after this, pushing away his dinner from before him and sitting in the listless attitude which I had so often seen.

"I do not wish for my dinner to-night," he said, after a pause; "I am not hungry."

The tears sprang to my eyes.

"It is all my fault for teasing you so," I said remorsefully. "Forgive me, Father; I might have waited till you had finished."

"However, you can now see that I desire to be on good terms with Mr. Thorburn," he said, as if following his own train of thought, and ignoring my apologies. "But I am working my own way also. We shall see who succeeds."

What could he mean? To what did he allude?

"And you cannot work your own way out of Halton, Father?" I asked eagerly, anxious to hear more.

"Not so well, not nearly so well," he replied. Then placing both hands on my shoulders, he looked me steadily in the face. "At one time, Ella, Mr. Thorburn would have helped me through all; he would still, but it must be at a sacrifice."

"What?" I asked uneasily.

He lowered his voice.

"If Edmund were to marry Kate or Helen Thorburn," he answered. "For all these years their father has been scheming at it, for all these years holding a sword above my head in the shape of threats and maledictions, and now that I have sent my boy out of harm's way his wrath is ready to fall."

This was an additional stab.

"Does Edmund know?" I whispered.

"Not Mr. Thorburn's scheme," replied my father; "he knows—some other things. I

have steadily refused to suggest the idea to Edmund's mind unless he thinks of it himself, and I have also refused to listen to George Thorburn's suit for Agnes unless she herself desires it. But all this, Ella, I have done temperately, as I would to a man in my own position."

"You think he will be very angry now, I suppose?"

"I am afraid your words will make him doubly so. You should be careful how you insult another person."

"And, therefore, having done it," I said, "I cannot prevent the fatal consequences. My only advice is for us to leave Halton, to despise poverty, and to live the rest of our days in peace."

And still the answer was, "It is impossible."

A thought flashed over me, the thought which, till now, had lain dormant. I dissembled.

"I suppose you are thinking of Mildred?"

"Partly; though I know her to be in good hands. I have several reasons."

I flushed.

"You would not like to leave so good a friend as Lady Constance?"

He hesitated a moment.

"No," he said at length; "I should not like to leave her either. But say no more, my dear; it is sufficient for you to know that I could not entertain the thought for a moment."

I rose from my kneeling posture. The whole scene flashed before my eyes, the scene which had turned my love for her to hatred. I could not yet hate my father for whom my love had ever been so great. But a quick sharp pang shot through me. It was all accounted for now. What prevented his leaving Halton? What was the tie which bound him so strongly? Alas! I knew too well. It was not his fear of making a position, of having money sufficient to maintain his children; it

was not his dread of Mr. Thorburn, nor of his revenge. It was, I knew, his love for Lady Constance.

## CHAPTER VII.

### MY MOTHER'S SECRET.

"'I have sinned,' she said."

*Mrs. Browning.*

I WAS anxious to keep from my mother my own share in the conversation which had taken place between George Thorburn and myself. Of course the facts had to be made known to her, as well as the result, and I hoped that her own good sense would show her the presumption he had shown, not only in making the offer, but in making it in so offensive a manner. She was strangely and sadly altered in these last few weeks. Her voice had lost its firmness, her

manner its decision, and she appeared to be constantly in tears when left to herself. I could not bear to see her so; it was unnatural to hear her, who had always expressed her opinions in a clear, decided manner, showing that they were based upon a foundation of strong common sense, now appealing to me, like a tired child who does not know its own mind. I was relieved when I found from Agnes that the story was known, although she said that our mother had shown a strange apathy during her account of it. This, at any rate, would spare me the trouble of going into the details and so compromising myself. I did not wish to vex her. I would have done all in my power to see her more like herself, and my own spirits suffered considerably at the sight of her sad face, and thin, shrunken figure. For she was not often ill. This terrible neuralgia had only attacked her within the last few weeks, and had been brought on, partly by the damp air, partly by her own state of weakened

nerves, my father had said. And yet her nerves had not always been weak, though her face, so long as I could remember it, had been a sad face. Alas! it was sadder than ever now; and I believed that I alone, of all that household, understood the cause which was weakening her daily both in mind and heart.

I went into her room the following afternoon, my work in hand, hoping to cheer her with a little bright conversation, which she would not find too fatiguing to enter into. She was seated in an old chintz-covered chair which had stood in the surgery during the days of my childhood, and which I remember now among some of the precious memories of my youth: the chair from which, arrayed in white night-gowns, we had taken it in turns to hold forth learned discourses and preach to one another the duties of life. Seated thus in a loose dressing-gown, her white face surrounded by a neat muslin cap, she looked more of an invalid than I almost ever remembered to

have seen her. A scarlet rug lay over her knees, upon which the thin hand with its well-worn ring, now loosely encircling the wasted finger, looked whiter than usual. She appeared to be reading, but put down her book upon my entrance, and laying it face downwards upon her lap, suddenly burst into a torrent of violent, hysterical tears. I was shocked to see her so. I knew that she must be suffering from some terrible anxiety or secret grief before she would give way in this manner; and kneeling down beside her, myself in tears at sight of her distress, I entreated to be told the cause of it.

"Oh, Ella, my child, my darling child," she said in broken accents, "pray for God's strength to guide you in all that you do, and never permit yourself to choose any other way but that which He points out to you."

"Mother, dear, do you think I am anxious to do any but His will?" I asked in a startled tone.

"No, my child, no; but sometimes we allow ourselves to be blinded by our own desires, for which a life's misery never can atone."

"What can you mean?" I asked. "Is this about Agnes and George Thorburn?"

"No, love; I was not thinking of that then. I was thinking of myself, my own unhappy self, who have brought nothing but pain and disgrace to those who are most dear to me."

"Mother, you shall not speak so; you are not well, or you would not think of such a thing," I said in remonstrance.

"I acknowledge all that, Ella. I am not well; weak in mind as well as in body, and at times of weakness thoughts often oppress us which we can put from us when we are well; but somehow I feel now as if I should not live long, and before I die I must ask your forgiveness for the wrong which I have done to all of you."

"Mother, I will not believe it," I cried, taking her hand and kissing it. "What wrong could

you ever have done? When have you been anything but right and true and good?"

"Thank God, my child, that you feel this. I have striven with all my strength to do a mother's duty by you. The wrong was not then; it was long before, Ella, before I married."

My face paled as some unknown fear seized me, and I could barely trust myself to say with calmness, "What was it?"

"The wrong I did in marrying your father. Oh, Ella, how can I tell you? I decoyed him, my dear, by falsehood and stratagem, from one who, pure as an angel, loved him with all her heart; and when I had fully impressed him with the idea that she had deceived him, I left no stone unturned till I had won him for myself. Do you think that the thought of this alone is not sufficient to cause a lifetime of unhappiness?"

Seated upon a low stool at her feet, my face upon the worn hand which in spite of its

hard work was soft and white still, I covered my eyes to shut out from me, if it were possible, the shame of such an avowal. But was it for me to condemn my mother?

"And then?" I whispered, in anxious and impatient dread of what might follow.

"Why, then with specious argument I persuaded him that what I had done was for his sake only, that I would make him happier than she could ever have the power to do, and so blinded his eyes that he believed in me."

Her voice was calm and clear now, and she spoke in gentle, refined accents, such as she was accustomed to use when speaking with any of her own family. She went on boldly:

"This marriage between your father and the young lady I speak of, was the darling wish of his father and mother's heart. For years they had planned it and hoped for it; and when the cruel disappointment came, in which your father refused to see her, without giving a reason for it, his father's anger knew no

bounds. He declared that his son should marry her or no one, and that in any other alternative not a sixpence should be his. High words passed between them, in which both father and son lost all control over themselves; and when your father left the room, hardly knowing or heeding what he did, he came at once to me, and entreated me sarcastically to share his fortunes, which were those of a beggar. I readily accepted him, not believing for a moment that his father's resentment would last. My ambition was satisfied, I had won my prize. Fearful that anything should occur which could still take him from me, I entreated him to consent to a secret marriage, and within three weeks of that time we were married in London with Mr. and Mrs. Thorburn as our witnesses."

I felt my breath come fast, my hands become cold, but I did not lift my head, I only kissed the hand beneath it in token that my mother had my forgiveness at least.

"Ah, Ella, that is not all! Before a month passed I knew the truth: your father had never loved me. In a moment of frenzy he had sued for my hand; and now that he had won it, what was the result? True to his word, his father never saw him again, and beggary and starvation stared us in the face. It was then that Mr. Thorburn proved himself our friend. He was an ironmonger in London, and doing well. He offered to assist us, and with the help of his money and what I could earn, your father studied medicine and qualified himself as a regular practitioner. It did not take much to keep us then, but when my boy was born I don't know where I should have been but for Mrs. Thorburn and her husband. Now, Ella, you know some of our obligations to these people whom you have so despised."

"Yes, Mother," I uttered briefly, in the anguish of my pride and humiliation.

My mother paused, but her voice was steadier

now. The ice being broken, she could speak with more confidence.

"After a time," she resumed, "your father began his practice in Halton; but long before that the cruel truth had dawned upon me. How could he love me who was cast in a different mould from himself? Our tastes did not agree in one particular. But I did strive to do my duty, and I know that he did also. God bless him! he has never been unkind. If he did not love me he would not quarrel. You have never seen anything like disputes between us, Ella, have you?"

"No, Mother, no," I murmured, my head still bent over the arm of her chair.

"Thank God!" she said fervently. "No, we never quarrelled, and so long as I could keep him in ignorance of the truth I felt that we never should. But the day came at last when he found me out; when he found that the story I had told about the woman he loved was a fabrication, a cruel, monstrous lie. Oh,

Ella! I thought he would almost have lost his reason then. His broken faith in me was so great that I felt nothing would restore it; and though I knew that all these years he had never ceased to love her in spite of the wrong which he believed her to have done, now that my guilt was established, and her innocence made clear, could I blame him if he almost turned from me? Even then—even then—O God! he killed me with his goodness."

Her words dropped one by one upon my heart like drops of molten lead, as I breathed within me, "My dear, dear Father!"

"He told me all he had heard, he taxed me with the falsehood, and I acknowledged it. But I knew that the blow had killed whatever love remained, and I think it killed me also. I think I have been dying ever since, and I long to go, as he must long also."

"Mother, don't say it!" I wailed, roused at length into speech.

"Yes, Ella, it is true. How can he wish anything else? My life is only a stumbling-block to him. He might yet marry her, yet inherit what comes to him by right, yet receive his father's blessing, and be acknowledged as his son. What else can I do to atone for it all?"

"She is living, then?" I asked.

"Yes, Ella, she still lives; and more than that, he still loves her—will always love her, whether he marries her or not."

Did I not know it far too well? Were my mother's words necessary to verify my own convictions? I recalled his speech to me the evening before: "I am working my own way also." And now these words struck upon my heart like a funeral knell. Could he be working his way back into his father's favour? If so, by what means? What other means were open to him but to wipe out the old stain by doing his will at last? This thought was too fearful—I put it from me.

"Mother, you cannot tell me the lady's name, I suppose?"

"No, my Ella. My wish is to acknowledge my own sin, to atone, if it were possible, for the misery I have caused. With nothing else have I to do. What your father thinks best he will tell you."

But could I ever ask him?

"And yet I want so much to know," I murmured; "perhaps I might be the means of helping him to regain his position."

"No, Ella; of that I am confident. No one who ever knew his father could doubt that his word once taken was sacred. Would he have kept his anger through all these years if he was likely to relent? There is but one way, the way of which I have spoken."

I rose, trembling, to my feet.

"Mother, for God's sake don't say it. That shall never be. I will do my utmost to prevent it. He shall not love her better than he does you."

"Sit down, my child," she said quietly, "and be calm. You see that I am so. And yet I have known all your life that he must have loved her best."

I remembered Mrs. Thorburn's words about the funeral, about my father's not venturing at such a time, and the remark, "Law! Mrs. Hamilton, it must be very hard for you."

"Mrs. Thorburn knows, doesn't she?" I whispered.

My mother shivered slightly.

"Yes; she and her husband both know."

"Oh, Mother! how could you tell them?"

"My dear, they knew it long before."

Then they were, after all, confidential friends of the family, friends to whom our most sacred secrets were entrusted? No wonder George presumed to think of Agnes, that Kate aspired to a marriage with Edmund.

"We are indeed under obligations," I said bitterly, while my heart was sick with pain. I gazed into the fire before me, which had sunk

into one mass of red dull glow, the embers caked together of different shapes, some grey, some tinged with a bright red, some almost white in their intensity of heat. So was our life, or the various thoughts and circumstances of which it was composed. So was my beating, restless heart, now satisfied, now despairing, now tinged with glowing hopes and fancies, but at this moment chilled and dead.

I thrust the poker between the bars, and the ruddy blaze threw its light upon the opposite wall, upon the old-fashioned bedstead with its chintz hangings, and brightened the interior of the room. It was dark without now, one of those dull December days which precede Christmas; but our conversation was better in the dark. If only it would pass away with the dark as a horrible dream, and be forgotten when the light came! But as I sat thus musing, I heard my father's well-known step in the hall, and Edmund's voice speaking with him.

"Mother, there is Edmund, and Father home so early." I tried to speak cheerfully, though in the reaction of feeling my voice was unsteady. In a few minutes they had entered the room, and Edmund was folded to my mother's heart.

Again the tears were raining down her cheeks, and sobs were choking her voice. My father went up to her.

"Come, Mary, you must not give way like this. Don't you feel better?"

"Yes," she said faintly, "but I am weak. Give me my smelling-salts, Ella."

I gave them to her, choking back my own tears, and then Agnes came in, delighted to see Edmund also.

So we sat round the fire, a pleasant little family party, upon that Christmas Eve which would ever be so memorable to me, and Edmund cheered us with an account of himself and of his work in London.

In the midst of it a knock was heard at the

door, and the maid announced Mr. Thorburn in the dining-room. He wished to see the Doctor or Miss Ella. I knew too well what had brought him, but I rose at once, anxious to be brave and get it over. As I turned to my mother I noticed her face ashy pale. I bent over and kissed her.

"Don't anger him," was her homely advice. "Oh, Ella! mind, my dear."

I tried to reassure her, and then followed my father downstairs. As we entered the dining-room Mr. Thorburn stood with his back to us, staring into the fire.

"Good evening," he said, turning to us hat in hand, but not offering to come forward. "I 've just come to speak to your daughter, Doctor, about her behaviour to my son the other evening."

"Have you?" I said quietly. "Pray take a seat, Mr. Thorburn."

He sat down, placing his hat on the table.

"Well," he said, unbuttoning his overcoat

and throwing it back; "you've got to make an apology, young lady, for them words of yours."

"What words?" said my father in his clear voice.

"Why, the words she said to Mr. George Thorburn. I don't rightly recollect now, but something about an insult for him to address her father's daughter. I just wish to explain to you, Miss, what you mayn't know before, that my son does you just as much honour in asking for the 'and of Miss Agnes, as she does him in acceptin' it, and so I'd have you to understand."

He put his thumbs into the arm-holes of his waistcoat as he spoke, and nodded his head defiantly.

"Pooh, pooh!" said my father, good temperedly. "I think that is quite an understood question, Thorburn. It seems to me, the whole matter rests with my daughter Agnes herself, and, of course, if she cannot see matters in

quite the same light as your son, why, there is an end of it. We can't help these things, you know."

"No, but that's not the p'int. The question is, does Miss Agnes think it a degradation to marry him, or not?"

His utterance was not very clear, and I had a grave suspicion that he had been drinking.

"I have not heard Agnes say anything of the sort, Mr. Thorburn," I answered steadily; "but if you ask me the question, I must own to you that I did imply that the other evening, and that I thought so."

My father hastily interposed.

"At that time my daughter was unaware of the kindness which you had shown to her family, and only spoke from her impression of our relative position in the world."

"No, she wasn't unaware, nor nothing of the sort," he said rudely, his anger carrying away all his native politeness. "She know'd it

as well as you; for I told her myself but that for me, you and yours wouldn't 'a 'ad many friends nor sixpences neither."

My father's calm face flushed as he said:

"It was extremely good of you."

"Yes; and now I just wish to tell her a little more. Do you know who your father is, Miss? Do you know who 's your mother, and where she came from, and how she married your father, and who give 'em a 'elpin 'and?"——

He was stopped for an instant by my father's powerful voice.

"Thorburn, be silent! what my children know, they shall know from me, not you. One other word, and I turn you from this house."

"Oh, you 'll turn me out, will you?" he said in a voice of violent anger. "Well, I 'm an old man to fight now, but come along, I 'm ready for you."

He squared his fists and laughed a drunken laugh, hideous to hear, but my father stood erect and faced him calmly.

"If you were as you ought to be," he answered, "you would remember the respect due to a young lady. What you have to say must be said quietly, or not at all."

"Well, then, I've just to say this; that I'm as good a gentleman as you, any day, and come of honest parents, and my wife 's as good as your wife; so there, now, and no one need say again me."

My father was silent.

"And what 's more," he continued. "I've been always good and true to my wife, which is more than can be said of others; I don't go harkin' after other people and neglectin' of her, killing her by inches with my unkindness."

I glanced at the proud, stern face of my poor, deeply injured father. If it was the truth, what provocation had he not received? But his mouth was tightly compressed, and his next words were terribly cold and formal.

"May I ask what this has to do with me?"

"Why, a good deal, and so your daughter

there 'ull find some day, perhaps. If the cap fits, you may wear it."

This was too much.

"Mr. Thorburn, you will have the goodness to leave my house," was said in a tone so quiet and firm that I marvelled. "If you came here to speak about your son, you have chosen a strange method of doing it, but I think your remarks are quite sufficient for the present."

"Oh, you do? well, I don't happen to think so. I 'm not going out of this house in that sort of way. I 'm going to tell your daughter, Miss Hamilton, there, that I 'm a gentleman, and knows gentleman's ways; that I 've a better house over my 'ead than yours, by a long chalk; and that if it wasn't for me, you'd 'a cut a pretty figure in the world."

"So you have already remarked."

"Well, and then I 'm a' honest man, too, and George is a' honest man, and we 're all honest. We don't live on other folks bread, and turn

round on 'em at the last. I don't go makin' a fool of myself with other women——"

"Scoundrel!" burst from my father's lips, as with one lightning grasp he seized him by the collar.

I trembled and rushed forward.

"Father, don't; don't touch him."

My father relinquished his hold in an instant, but he said in a voice which quavered with passion:

"Explain yourself instantly."

"Well, then, you just leave me alone," roared the other, giving himself a shake. "You knows well enough what I mean. You know where you go most days when you 've the chance. Ask the people of Halton what 's said about you; explain yourself to your daughters. Never mind about me—oh, that don't matter, not at all. Now I 've said my say. And you, Miss Ella, you mind how you speak of me and mine for the future."

He took up his hat as he spoke, and with

this last cruel stab aimed at my father's breast, made his way towards the door. As he opened it, my mother's white face met his. She had apparently heard the altercation, and, trembling in every limb, had made her way downstairs in her dressing-gown.

Mr. Thorburn burst into a rude laugh.

"Why, bless 'ee, Missus, what do you want?"

"Nothing, nothing," she said hastily. "I thought someone was ill; I fancied I heard Ella scream."

"No, Mother, I am quite well," I answered, feeling sure that my white face must contradict my words.

Mr. Thorburn chuckled as if greatly pleased at the success of his little plot. He walked unsteadily towards the front door, opened it wide to admit a full current of fresh air into the hall, and banged it to again with a loud noise.

"Mary," said my father, calmly, "this is very imprudent of you; how could you think

of coming downstairs in this manner? Go back at once, my dear, and go to bed. Ella, take your mother upstairs."

She obeyed him without a word, only with one meaning glance at his stern set face, under whose expression was hidden his great and deep feeling. I led her upstairs, helped her to go to bed, and brought her a glass of wine. But the pain returned again with greater violence than before, and soon reached a pitch of agony. I tried every means in my power of alleviating it, and at length went downstairs for my father. He was not at home, he had gone out directly after Mr. Thorburn had left.

I made my way into the dining-room where Agnes and Edmund were seated before the fire.

"Edmund, do go for Father," I entreated. "This excitement has been too much for Mother, she is nearly wild with pain."

My brother lost no time in putting on his hat, while Agnes and I returned to the bed-

room. In a short time we had the satisfaction of seeing my father enter the room, and take his seat by her bedside.

"Mary, my poor Mary," he said, holding her pulse for a minute. "I am so grieved to see you like this."

She smiled gratefully, but was suffering too much for words.

"Go downstairs, my children," he said in a tired voice to us both. "She must have perfect quiet; I will remain alone with her."

So we crept down noiselessly to tea, and there, over the hissing kettle, we told Edmund the unfortunate story about George Thorburn, I taking care to reserve to myself a large share of blame. After a time we had the satisfaction of hearing that our mother had fallen asleep, and Father came down to partake of his simple dinner. It was evidently his desire to make Edmund's home-coming pleasant and happy, and he talked cheerfully, though I knew it must be an effort to him.

Perhaps my love for my father blinded me to his faults. Though anger and indignation had once risen in my breast, I felt nothing now but intense pity for his wrongs. Was it possible that the people of Halton talked of his frequent visits to Milford? Ah! how could they know the excuse for it? And yet, could anything excuse his love for another woman when bound to a wife? could anything excuse her love for him when she knew that he was married? I wondered if he had ever really wished my mother gone, whether he ever would marry Lady Constance if he were free to do so. Alas! I could give myself but one answer: I was sure of it.

About an hour afterwards my mother awoke, and I went up to her again. She was much better, she said; Father had given her something which had caused a refreshing sleep, and she felt the benefit already; but she looked unutterably sad, and with difficulty restrained her tears while she spoke to me. I took care

not to broach any painful subject which might annoy her, and tried to cheer her by the prospect of Mildred's arrival on the morrow; but seeing that her tears flowed faster than ever at this allusion, I gave up that and offered to send my father to her again.

"We will all come up and say good-night," I said, "and then you shall have him all to yourself, and go off quietly to sleep."

In answer to my call, Edmund and Agnes came and kissed her once more, and then we all left her, and descended to the dining-room. My father had gone into his own room, and, according to my promise, I sought him there with the request that he would go up to my mother. I found him seated at his writing-table, a number of letters before him, through which he appeared to be looking. A slight shade passed over his face as I stood beside him, and laid my cool hand upon his forehead. How thin his face was, how clearly, sharply defined his features seemed!

"Father dear," I asked, "are you busy? Can you go up to Mother for a little while?"

"Yes, my love, if she wants me." He hesitated. "Would you like to know what I am doing?"

"Yes; can I help you?"

"No, dear, you cannot help me exactly. You may look at one or two of these letters, though, if you wish; letters which I prize very highly, though they may not have the same value in your eyes."

"What letters are they?"

"Some of them are from my mother, and written when I was a very little boy, taken by my nurse to see some relatives of ours. You may see one if you choose."

I took up the tiny note, yellow with age, and with faint outlines of what appeared to have been once clearly-defined characters. My face reddened with a tumult of feeling as I opened it. It was very brief; only a few short lines, hoping that her darling was good and

happy, and signing herself, with much affection, his loving mother; not much to satisfy me, if satisfaction I desired.

There were one or two others in much the same style, but no clue, not a name, even, to show me by whom they were written. My father watched my face as I laid them down quietly while a shade of disappointment crossed over it.

"Have you nothing else that I may see?" I asked at length.

He clasped his hands before him while his arms rested on the chair, and mused for one brief minute. At length he said, as if thinking aloud:

"Yes; after all, you may as well see it, I suppose."

Taking a bunch of keys which hung from the lock of his desk, he singled out one from the rest, unlocked a drawer in his writing-table, took therefrom a small wooden box which he unlocked again with a smaller key,

and at length produced a red morocco case, within which was a miniature painted on ivory. He opened and handed it to me. A youthful face of a woman, apparently about five-and-twenty, with small and delicate features. I could see but faint resemblance to my father in it, but a strong likeness to my sister Agnes. The hair was dark brown like hers, and the expression of the hazel eyes and small determined mouth reminded me forcibly of her. Up till that time I had thought Agnes more like my mother. I gazed at it with an insatiable desire to know all that I could concerning it.

"Oh, Father! may I have it?" I earnestly entreated.

"Well, Ella, it is all I have of hers, except one lock of hair, and those small pearl earrings that I have already given you; but if you really desire it, I have no objection."

"Thank you," I said eagerly, ready to carry it off at once.

"No, don't take it now," said he, stopping

me. "I will have it made into a locket for you, that you may wear it; in the meantime, leave it with me. And now I must go up to your mother."

He gathered the letters together which he had been perusing; letters of various kinds, some of them in a masculine hand, which I conjectured to be his father's writing; but whatever were their contents, he gave me no hint of them.

After tying them up in packets as they had been before, and placing them once more in safety, he rose from his seat, turned down the gas, and we left the room together.

Why do I dwell upon these minute details? Why, but because they now stand forth upon the very threshold of my memory with vivid, sharp distinctness?

I went back to the drawing-room, where I had left my brother and sister, and saw no more of him for that night. The house was silent; no sound heard except the old clock,

or the distant shriek of the railway. What did this silence portend? What shadow was it that was creeping over us?

Oppressed by the dulness, or, perhaps, by the events of this trying day, I was thankful when bed-time arrived at last. On my way past my mother's door I paused and listened. No sound was to be heard, not even the faintest whisper. Had she already fallen into her deep slumber?

But at midnight the cry came. I was roused from sleep by my brother, who, knocking violently at my door, demanded admittance, and when I was sufficiently awake to reply, saw him standing before me with ashy face, pale to the very lips.

"Ella and Agnes, come," was all he said; "mother is worse."

No need to tell me what those words implied. I knew it all before he spoke. With trembling limbs, with every nerve quivering and throbbing, we rushed to her room.

There lay my mother, cold and lifeless, the arms of death only too surely twined about her; and my father, scarcely less ghastly than she, was stretched upon the bed beside her.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### GRIEF AND MYSTERY.

"Ay, and if she spoke, maybe
She would answer like the son,
'What is now 'twixt thee and me?'"
*Mrs. Browning.*

THERE is no need to dwell upon the events of the following day, that Christmas which can never be forgotten; no need to describe how poor Mildred came, indeed, to spend the day, as she had anticipated, nor how the house was thronged with inquisitive questioners, eager to hear all particulars of the sad event which had taken place.

But one fact is worthy of record; that

whereas the Lady Constance Milford had never been known to pass the threshold of our door throughout my mother's lifetime, she now came, after night had thrown her mantle over the earth, and there was no one who could recognise her, came and stood beside my mother's pale face, and wept tears, as if she, too, regretted her loss.

How stung I felt at sight of her hypocrisy! She could not feel for one whom she had never known and always avoided. She could but have one sentiment, and that was relief that she no longer stood in her way. Irritated at what I knew to be false, though she were a queen, I could not have paid her the compliment of concealing my bitterness.

"Why do you come?" I cried, in wild anger; "is it to rejoice with us, or to mourn?"

She burst into tears, and taking my hand in hers, would have kissed me, but I shook her off.

"No, Lady Constance, no; it is useless to pretend any feeling. You have hated my mother, you know best with what cause, but do not come here to reproach us now that she can do you no further harm."

She looked surprised at my words. Perhaps she was astonished that I knew so much about her, but she did not attempt to contradict me. She only said:

"May I not offer you my sympathy, Ella?"

"No," I said brusquely, "I don't want sympathy; I want only to be left alone. Oh, what is to become of us all?" And I turned my face from her in a fresh burst of weeping.

As for my father, he seemed to have altered his whole being since yesterday. Ill as he had looked then, it was nothing compared to the almost livid hue which now overspread his face, a look of horror mingled with pain. It was useless for us to attempt consolation; he only kissed us in a sad, grave, scared way,

and then retired to his room and shut himself within it.

When Mrs. Thorburn and Annie came in early, fussy but kind, and weeping tears which I felt to be genuine, he received them coldly but courteously, and refused all assistance from them. But when Lady Constance came in the late afternoon, she was permitted to enter his sanctum, to sit with him behind closed doors, regardless of the world's opinion. Of course there was much to be done and thought of; the first question naturally arising, how had death been caused?

My father's account, given in a strange, incoherent manner, was, that after going up to my mother's room, he had found her in extreme pain, and that at length she had persuaded him to administer a little chloroform, which he had once tried successfully before. He, being always extremely careful in such matters, had himself given it, to a very slight extent, afterwards placing it on a table near

the bed. He had watched her sleeping calmly, nay, the effect had so far gone off that she had awakened and spoken to him in her usual manner, and they had had some conversation together before he had fallen asleep. He remembered no more till he awoke in a stupefied manner, and, perceiving a smell of chloroform in the room, had roused himself with difficulty, to find his wife unconscious beside him, and the bottle uncorked at her side. After trying various means unsuccessfully, he had aroused Edmund, who, returning with him, had assisted him in his endeavours; but when he saw that all efforts proved unavailing, he had himself fainted, and knew no more till he saw us all standing beside him. We knew the rest. Edmund at once went for another physician, who said upon arrival that death had taken place for more than an hour; and that was all we knew, all we were likely ever to know.

Of course there could be but one solution to the matter in our own minds; that our father,

having been asleep, our dear mother would not have liked to disturb him, and that the pain having returned, she herself must have reached the fatal bottle. The fact of its being beside her proved that she had set it down, and that the cork had either dropped out or had not been replaced. But though these facts were so clearly established that there could be no possible doubt about them, still, feelings which I would not acknowledge to myself, would force themselves into my imagination. If only I had not heard the story from my mother's lips which she had told me the previous day, if only it was all untrue, a dream of my own brain! Unfortunately, too, if Mr. Thorburn's cruel hints were true, there were others who might be likely to comment upon the strange sudden death; and yet here was my father shut in with Lady Constance in his own private room, regardless or forgetful that such opinions could be expressed.

The day dragged wearily by, the evening

had come again, and still my father appeared not, nor the lady who seemed already to have taken her place at his side. We were still sitting in the old dining-room, our untouched tea upon the table, when Mr. Thorburn was admitted.

He looked more softened than on the previous day, and certainly was sober now though sheepish. He walked up quietly to where I was sitting, and ignoring all differences, put out his hand and said:

"This is a bad business, my girl."

I took his hand. In spite of his cruel drunken speeches of yesterday, he had been a friend to my mother, and I would not forget it now. But my heart was too full for speech. He sat down quietly, and scarcely a word was spoken between us, only my little sister's sobs breaking the silence which hung about us.

"Where's your father?" he said at length; "I suppose I may see him?"

I drew a quick breath. My father was in

his room, and Lady Constance with him. Could I reveal this fact to Mr. Thorburn?

"I am afraid not," I answered; "he is very low, so much so that we can hardly rouse him. I think he prefers being alone."

"Ah, he may well be low," was the answer; "enough to make any man low, I should say, for his wife to die in such a manner."

I felt sick. The words were natural, but they made me shiver. I did not speak.

"Well," said Mr. Thorburn, "I suppose he knows there 'ull have to be an inquest, and I shall probably be on the jury. I think, as I 'm an old friend, he 'd do better to see me."

Agnes looked towards me, as if to read my thoughts; but as I did not respond, she answered him herself.

"I think, perhaps, my father might be induced to see you, Mr. Thorburn, if he knew that you wished it."

"Another time!" I could have cried out in my pain and anger. "After what you reproached

him with yesterday? Never, Mr. Thorburn!" But now, with facts corroborating his very words, I had not the courage to speak.

"Perhaps," I said slowly, "he might. I will go and see. Please to wait until I return."

I went to my father's room and knocked. There was a murmur of voices within, and then a pause. Then my father came forward and opened the door.

"Is it you, Ella? What do you want?"

"Father, Mr. Thorburn is here; he wishes to speak to you particularly. Do you think you can see him?"

He held the door in his hand and hesitated for a moment.

"I don't wish to see him," he said after a pause; "but I suppose I must if he desires it."

"I think he would be gratified," I said; "I fancy he wishes to be friendly."

He turned back into the room as I spoke, and I took this opportunity of entering also. Lady Constance sat by the table where I had

sat the previous evening. Bundles of papers and letters lay before her, which appeared to have been newly sorted and arranged, but she now leaned back in the leather arm-chair and listened to our conversation.

"Don't let me be an impediment," she said at once; "if you wish to see this man, I can go back to the dining-room."

So I had thought myself, but the question was, where I could conceal her? She and Mr. Thorburn must meet if she went at once across the hall to the dining-room.

"Can you come in here in the meantime?" I asked, stepping back into the little front parlour which was enshrouded in darkness.

"Certainly, if you wish it." She rose and came forward at once, while my father hastily gathered together every scrap of paper which seemed to be of importance, and thrusting them into a drawer, locked them with a careful hand.

How weary and sick I felt! How I did long

to love my father, yet how could I continue to do so? The man who could make love to a woman when his wife lay dead in the room above him—the man who could take her into the confidence of his heart at such a time as this—surely, though he were my own father, I must end by hating him. I recalled my mother's words, "I knew he had never loved me," and I knew now how true they were.

I led Lady Constance into the other room, which was cold and dark, and then I went for Mr. Thorburn. My father followed her, followed her into the outer room as I left it. I drew the door to, but did not latch it, my curiosity and jealousy aroused. I paused without the door, anxious but fearful of what I might hear. What was it? The sound of a kiss; the sound of soft murmured words, "My darling! what should I do without you? What did I do through all the years in which——" I could hear no more; the sentence ended in a whisper.

Then, half mad with grief and pain, I crossed the hall and bade Mr. Thorburn follow me, and by the time he had reached the door again my father had returned to his room. He closed it upon them both, and, indignant though I felt, I asked Lady Constance to return with me to the dining-room. No, she thought that she would prefer to remain there. Well, if it was so, I would remain also. We neither of us spoke; the murmur of voices reached us through the study door; then I heard something of "her ladyship" from Mr. Thorburn, then silence, then words of indignation on both sides, though softly spoken, and at length my father opened the inner door.

"Constance, will you speak to me for a moment?"

I see his face now, white even to death, as he stood with the light surrounding him. It flooded the room in which he sat, but apparently he was unaware of my presence, and I determined that he should continue to be. As

the door closed upon them, I stole away, trembling with a vague, unknown fear, and took my seat by the fire in the dining-room.

What actually passed between them I never knew, but this much I gathered—that there were threats on Mr. Thorburn's part, threats of a nameless horrible something, from which I could not free myself.

I sat upon my poor mother's little chair, and took Mildred upon my knee, she, the only one of us in black, and that, as it seemed, in mockery. Edmund was in his own room, mysterious even in his grief as he had been of late. In a short time I heard my father call him, and he, too, joined the party in the study. Well, even that was better than that my father should remain alone with Lady Constance, though the mystery was intolerable. I gathered that Mr. Thorburn had reproached my father with his love for her, that he had upbraided him with his unseemly conduct, and that my father, ever bold, even when in the wrong, had called her

into Mr. Thorburn's presence to brave his opinion. But how would this be when the secret was known in Halton, when the criticisms so harshly uttered were passed from mouth to mouth? I shuddered at the thought of it.

Perhaps the disgrace and shame would pass when we, too, had passed away; perhaps in the long, long years to come, we might still live it down, and be happy. But oh! how I had longed for freedom from my old home, for a better position in the world. Could I wish to purchase it now at such a price?

After some time had passed, I heard Mr. Thorburn emerge from the study, and go out through the hall. Then the others appeared, Edmund coming in with them, and then, after Lady Constance had partaken of some tea, and made a pretence of eating, she took her departure alone in the brougham.

That week went by with rapid strides, for though, in looking back afterwards, it appeared

like a month which had passed, still the existing events of which it was composed helped to dissipate our thoughts, and so bear the time onward in its flight. There was the mourning to think about, and also there were the funeral, the inquest, and, lastly, the verdict: "*That the deceased died from the effects of an overdose of chloroform; but whether it had been administered by accident or design, there was not sufficient evidence to prove.*"

Mr. Thorburn was one of the jurymen, and this was his opinion in common with that of others. But from that time my father shook him off. No favours were accepted from any of the family. Mrs. Thorburn's offers of assistance were declined in the most formal manner, and even Annie's entreaties that she might help us with our needlework were refused. We had peremptory orders neither to admit them within our doors, nor to visit them, and a card with the usual thanks for kind inquiries was enclosed as a last token of friendliness.

Mildred stayed at home for nearly three weeks, and then went back to Milford, accompanied by Agnes. I, alone, remained in the old brick house, wandering from room to room in my father's absence, and sitting with him when he returned. And in the many long dull hours which passed, I had ample time to reflect upon the life which had gone, whose joys and sorrows were now ended. I knew that it was better for herself, but I missed her every hour of the day. Her clear, practical wisdom was a serious loss to me, her gentle advice, her love which could never be restored. Ah! these were sad days, and my heart aches now at the memory which lingers still about them. I was alone—so terribly, utterly alone.

Of course I had written to Mrs. Douglas to ask for a farther respite from my duties, and of course it had been granted. But how was I to go now, and leave Agnes alone? It was impossible to think of it. And yet—oh! how my heart died within me!—was Claude to be relin-

quished? Were all my hopes for ever to be given up? Not once had I seen him, not once heard of him even, since that day at Milford. He was at Wentworth, of course, I knew, perhaps with Ethel Blantyre, who doubtless was staying at the Court by this time. My father was out as usual a great deal, and I had nothing to do but analyse all that surrounded my life. One evening, about a month after my mother's death, he entered the house earlier than usual, a shade of mingled annoyance and pain upon his face which perplexed me. He sat down in silence, barely noticing the kiss with which I greeted him. I knew that he often had trials in his profession of which we were in ignorance; I had often seen a shadow cast upon him by his natural anxiety, in addition to the cloud which had more or less always hung over him. Now that was in part accounted for, and yet, though my mother had declared that he did not love her, and that her death would be a relief to him, when I could

not doubt by his conduct that her words would prove true, still his haggard, worn look, which seemed hopeless in its anxiety, troubled me more than I could say. I looked at him uneasily, with a strange pain at my heart; then bursting into tears, I knelt down beside him in my old fond way, entreating to be told of his trouble. He looked at me with eyes which were moist with tears, and at last I felt one drop upon my hand while he put his arm lovingly round my neck.

"My child," he said wearily, "I know you would do all in your power for me. Thank God, I have been blessed with loving children; but I have passed through many trials, and I fear the worst has yet to come."

"Oh, Father!" I cried, "what is it? What can you have to fear?"

My heart was so weary that I felt as if I could bear no more; grief for my mother, jealousy for her dear sake, separation from Claude, for whose love and sympathy I yearned,

loneliness and anxiety. My spirit rebelled against it.

And then he told me that only that morning vague reports had reached his ears, and that he was afraid of his position in Halton. A family whom he had attended for many years had called in Doctor Thompson from a neighbouring town, and that it had been told him so significantly that he could not doubt that there had been a reason for it.

"What reason do you suppose there can be?" I asked, my face blanching with a vague terror.

His lips quivered. I had never seen my father unmanned like this.

"Ella, I cannot, will not give a reason," he said. "It is sufficient for me to know that my reputation is suffering."

"Your reputation!" I cried, indignantly casting aside a possibility of that nameless fear. "How could there be a doubt about that, when you have been known and loved for so many years?"

"I do not know, I will not say, and nothing has been expressed to me upon such a subject. But I know that people avoid me, and that instead of receiving sympathy, such as a man would expect at a time like this, I am met with cold looks and suspicious glances."

I shivered with a cold, sick terror; but I was his daughter, his nearest relative, now that the tie between him and his wife was severed. I must speak, though he condemn me for it.

"Father dear, forgive me for saying it; oh, pray forgive me for even hinting at such a subject; but—is it not on account of Lady Constance Milford?"

His face darkened and flushed.

"Then let them talk," he said; "I cannot afford to lose her friendship."

"But, dear Father, would you not if you knew that poor Mother did not wish it?" I stopped and looked upwards into the tired face.

"Did not wish it?" he repeated, in a strange,

troubled tone. "This is news to me, indeed. She never hinted at such a thing to myself."

"No, Father, no; because she loved you so. She was so unhappy when she spoke of it all before her death."

"When did she speak of it?" he asked, sitting upright in his chair. "What did she say? Tell me, Ella."

"She told me all," I murmured, bursting into tears; "how she had done wrong in order to marry you because she loved you so, dear Father; how bitter the consequences were; and how she regretted and repented of it every day of her life."

He sighed deeply, but did not speak.

"She spoke of your goodness to her, how she felt it, and how she had striven to do her duty by us all. And she said—oh, Father, dear!—she said that you must wish her to be gone, and that she herself had no desire to live."

"She said this to you, Ella?" His voice sank to an agitated whisper.

"Yes, Father; she said that if she were gone, you could marry again and be happy; and she only desired your happiness now."

"Poor Mary!" he said sadly.

"And her death was the only hope of reconciliation with your father, who would never forgive her or you so long as she lived. She hoped for that, and prayed that it would be so one day. Father, you think it also?" For his face was ashy pale.

He did not reply, but leaned back heavily with closed eyes, as if his feelings were too deep for words.

"Did she tell you who my father was?" he asked at length.

"No; she told me nothing more than what I have said, and that she hoped you would yet marry the lady whom you had always loved."

He put up his hands before him hastily.

partly that which has made me resent Lady Constance's so-called 'kindness' to myself."

"Nevertheless it is kindness," answered my father; "kindness which your mother did not resent to my knowledge."

"No, poor dear! because she was too anxious to atone for the fault which she had committed; but she must have felt the slight which was shown her."

"Did she say so?" asked my father.

"No. On the contrary, she spoke gratefully of Lady Constance's kindness to us, and begged me not to reject it. She did not seem to expect kindness for herself, though I know she was unhappy. It was just before her death that she told me of her fault, and how, through it, you had been separated from your family. And," I added, with a falter in my voice, "she said that—that—she knew that you wished her gone."

My father looked inexpressibly pained.

"It was wrong of her to say that," he

"Don't speak of it," he said in an agitated tone.

"Oh, then, Father, show everyone, show the world that Mother was mistaken. Father, promise me that you will not marry."

"Child, you talk nonsense," he said irritably. "I have no thought of marriage at present. But I cannot give up Lady Constance. If I were to do so, every hope that I have must perish."

"Then let them perish," I said; "but do not dishonour my mother's name by allowing the world to make evil remarks."

"That I cannot avoid," he said proudly. "But I was totally unaware that your mother objected to the intimacy with Lady Constance, in which"—he paused—"in which she could not share. But how could I tell her that Lady Constance did not desire to know her?"

"She knew it," I said bitterly. "Lady Constance showed her this only too plainly. It is

partly that which has made me resent Lady Constance's so-called 'kindness' to myself."

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My father looked inexpressibly pained.

"It was wrong of her to say that," he

answered calmly. "I never showed her that such a desire was ever felt for a moment by me. I tried to do my duty faithfully, as I believe she did to me. But this is a sad story, Ella, and I am sorry that you should have heard it. I would never have revealed such facts to you myself, though they are true. Try to forget them now, my dear; they belong to the past. Let them be buried with the past, and let peace fall upon your mother's memory."

"Always," I said, weeping; "even though I know now that it is only through her death that you can be reconciled to your father."

## CHAPTER IX.

### BACK AT WENTWORTH COURT.

"She has a lovely face."

*Tennyson.*

For three months I remained at home, going through the same monotonous round of daily tasks which I set myself in order to kill the time, which went by so wearily. I was not entirely alone, for Agnes soon returned from Milford and shared with me the dulness of our changed lives. It was not only that we missed the dear, familiar face, not that our loneliness and want of companionship were

daily more and more felt; there were other reasons which made life almost insupportable. Our few friends had forsaken us. My father's practice decreased visibly, and people looked with doubtful, pitying eyes as we passed along the street. Everything showed us only too plainly that his reputation was suffering. And still he braved public opinion, and visited at Milford as formerly.

For myself, I tried to keep up appearances by driving out there occasionally. I could not allow the Halton gossips to discuss the question of my disapproval of this intimacy. But I showed no cordiality to the woman who had robbed my mother of the love which should have been hers, and I rarely addressed her if I could avoid doing so.

At length my father told me that he wished me to return to Wentworth. Lady Constance had offered a temporary home to Agnes, and he would prefer my leaving Halton for a time. His expenses would by that means be lessened,

and he felt it becoming necessary to practise stricter economies. I knew that the latter part of this speech was true; his practice had now become so small that he found it difficult to give me money for household purposes, and he must put down his brougham if we continued to live together. If Agnes did not object to going to Milford, it seemed the best plan that could be made, for her presence might prove a foil to the busy tongues which we knew were already at work. The news to myself was delightful. At last I was to see Claude, at last to hear his voice, and be assured of his love. I had longed so for a sight of him that my heart was sick with the hope which was so long deferred; but I trusted that the reward was now at hand which would pay me for all my pain. No message had been received to tell me of the sympathy which I was sure he felt; but I never doubted him. His words were ringing in my ears, those words which had sealed the bond between us,

"Trust me not at all, or all in all." I would trust him to the end.

I reached the Court on a blustering day in March. The biting north wind howled about my ears, like a fiend mocking me for my weakness in anticipating pleasures which might never be mine. My thoughts went back to the time when I had made the journey before, in timid hope, yet faint distrust of the future which then lay before me—of the time, too, when I had last stood upon the platform waiting for my departure for home, and consoling myself with the thought that only one fortnight would separate me from one who had become so dear. How long ago it was now! Three whole months had elapsed—three months which might have been years for the changes which they had wrought in our young lives.

As I looked from the window by which I sat, and strained my eyes in hopes of seeing the familiar horses or well-known livery, I was attracted by the sight of someone standing

upon the platform, gazing earnestly at each of the carriages as they passed. A figure which I knew too well, and which sent the blood to my face, and made my nerves quiver. He had come to meet me; he had not forgotten me after all.

He sprang into the carriage in which I was seated alone, under pretence of gathering together my various belongings; but my hands were tightly pressed in both of his, as he whispered earnestly, "Have you really come back at last?"

It was enough. His tone more than satisfied me; and I uttered a little cry of pleasure at sight of him, not attempting to conceal my feelings now.

"How I have longed for you!" I said, in the fulness of my heart, the tears springing to my eyes with all the painful pleasure which caused them. "I am so glad to be back again."

For answer he smiled a pleasant, reassuring smile.

"Never mind; you are here now. Are these all your traps? Here, William, take these shawls and umbrellas," he called to a footman who approached the carriage; then as he assisted me to get down, he said: "Amy is here with her sister in the carriage."

"With Miss Blantyre?" I asked. "Has she really come? How long has she been here?"

"About three weeks," he answered. "She couldn't come after Christmas, she had sprained her ankle skating. But she seems active enough now, so I suppose she is all right again."

"And as charming as ever?" I ventured to inquire.

"You shall judge for yourself. There she is." He indicated the carriage which was standing on the other side of the station-yard. "Amy was afraid to come any nearer because of the horses. I hope you don't mind walking across here in all this mud."

"No, not in the least. Is that your horse, tied near them?"

"Yes."

"Then you are riding?" I said in a tone of disappointment. "I was in hopes you were coming with us."

"There would not be room enough for four such big people in the carriage. Never mind, you shall see me to-night," he added, nodding encouragingly; "that is, if I can possibly come."

"Do come," I whispered.

"Well, Amy, here she is," he exclaimed, handing me into the carriage to receive her warm kiss, regardless of the presence of her servants.

"I am so glad to see you," she said tenderly, while a subdued light shone softly in her clear eyes. "This is my sister; may I introduce you to her?"

A girl, more lovely even than the photograph, in a stylish hat and feather, and en-

veloped in velvet and fur, was seated beside Mrs. Douglas. She turned her face towards me with a quick, sudden look, and then bowing slightly, looked out at the other side of the carriage, without speaking. I felt a little disappointed; but though she looked at me from time to time, as I answered Mrs. Douglas' questions, and even answered faintly when I glanced towards her in the course of conversation, she was for the most part silent during our drive homewards. I wondered if she was always like this, and whether I should like her. A girl who had broken the hearts of some half-dozen men, must surely have something to recommend her beside a pretty face, and she was evidently not shy. Perhaps she did not care to talk to a governess. At this thought my natural pride came to my assistance, and I determined not to trouble her.

I was received with a noisy but warm welcome by the little ones, especially by Lilian, who informed me that she had been much dis-

pleased at my absence, and had intended to write me a letter and tell me so. But when she informed her mother of these intentions, Mrs. Douglas had told her that it might have the effect of keeping me away altogether; and out of consideration for my feelings, she had given up the idea.

"But I am very glad that you 've come," she added, "for I think you 're much nicer than Aunt Ethel, and I 'm sure Uncle Claude thinks so too."

Fortunately for me, this confidence was imparted in the privacy of my own room, or the remark might have been more embarrassing. I ventured to ask in what way I was nicer than their aunt.

"You 're kinder," said Mabel, "and you don't tell us not to tease you when you 're talking, as she does. When she was sitting alone with Uncle Claude in the drawing-room the other day, she kept saying, 'Do run away, children, and don't fidget so.' "

"But that was because she had a headache, I suppose," said Lilian; "at least, she said she had a headache, and wouldn't go for a drive with Mamma, but when Uncle Claude came she seemed to grow quite well."

"Yes," said Mabel, "and he brought us chocolate, and wanted to give it to us, but she told us to go away, and so we hardly saw him."

I smiled as I thought how completely the children's description bore out that which I had heard of this young lady, and I felt amusement at the thought of how completely Uncle Claude must see through her stratagems.

In order to prove the truth of the children's remarks I allowed them to remain with me while I was unpacking, and to pull about my things to an extent which was very inconvenient. But I was pleased to know that they preferred me to Aunt Ethel. While I was thus engaged, a knock came to the door, which proved to be the housekeeper's, with a cup of

tea in her hand, and kind offers of help, as upon the first day of my arrival, six months ago. I was touched by her kindness, and, shaking hands with her, inquired if she had been quite well during my absence.

"Yes, thank you, Miss," she answered in her demure manner. "Can I put some of these things straight for you?"

"Thank you," I answered, glancing at the chaos which reigned in the apartment; "I am afraid these young ladies and I have been too busy to improve matters as satisfactorily as I could wish."

"Well, you haven't so much to arrange as you had when last you came, Miss, being in mourning." Then seeing my eyes fill with tears at the allusion, she continued: "Dear, dear—how sad it must have been for you."

"It was, indeed," I said in a low voice.

"Yes, it must have been. To have anyone snatched from your side so sudden-like is awful." She knelt down upon the floor as she

spoke, with her back towards me, and took up a worsted grenadine which I had put aside for immediate wear. "Can I tack this frilling into your dress?" she asked.

"No thank you, Burton; I will do it myself, presently," I answered, sipping the fragrant cup of tea with which she had supplied me. Then feeling as if I had found a friend, I continued: "Ah! it has been a terrible trial to us all—to my dear father especially."

"Has it?" she asked, more coldly than I thought was needful.

"Yes, indeed!" I said warmly; "I could not bear the house afterwards."

"Yes, that 's likely enough," she said with rough pathos; "it 's an awful thing to have happened, anyway, let alone its being your own mother. Here, Miss, let me have that frilling; I can put it into one of these drawers for you, where it won't be crushed."

A clear voice ringing along the passage interrupted her:

"Burtie, Burtie! where 's my Burtie?"

"She 's here, Auntie," said Lilian, flinging the door wide open and rushing into the passage. "She 's helping Miss Hamilton to unpack, so you can't have her."

"But I must have her," was the reply, uttered in a manner which was very like Lilian's own. "I want her directly."

"I 'm coming, Miss," said Burton, rising instantly, and sliding the frilling on to the ground from her lap just as the face appeared at the open door.

Miss Blantyre stopped for a moment and laughed.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Hamilton, for taking away your assistant, but she shall come back directly."

"Thank you, it is not of the least consequence," I answered; "I have nearly finished now. Pray don't trouble about me, Burton."

"I 'll come back in a moment, Miss," was the reply, as Burton left the room and closed

the door behind her. "Now what is it my baby wants?" she continued to Ethel Blantyre.

Lilian and Mabel laughed.

"Fancy calling that great big Aunt Ethel her baby!"

"Burtie," was the baby's remark as soon as she was in the passage, "what are you doing in there with her? You know I told you that I should be——"

The children's clatter prevented my hearing the last word; while Burton's answer was given in a whisper.

There was a good deal of soft laughter and playful scolding, the cause for which was lost upon me; a mock attempt at tears, a kiss, and finally, Burton returned to my room, her face set, and demure as usual.

"Burton, you spoil Aunt Ethel dreadfully," said Lilian. "Did you always spoil her when she was a little girl?"

The woman's face relaxed into a smile as if involuntarily.

"Yes, Miss Lilian," she said, "I could not help spoiling her. Everyone spoils your aunt."

"And did you spoil Mamma too?" asked Mabel.

"Well, perhaps your mamma did not spoil so easily as your aunt. But I daresay I spoiled her too."

"I wish you would spoil us," said Lilian; "I should like to feel spoiled."

"Spoilt people are not nice," I replied, thinking that if Burton did contemplate taking Lilian's advice, she would find some very good material ready to work upon. "But now, darlings, I think you must go away, for I am tired, and wish to be quiet for a little while."

For the wound in my heart was still very fresh, and I longed to be alone. I dressed myself slowly, wondering what my father was doing, and whether he would be very lonely when he came home to-night. Then my

quick imagination furnished me with pleasanter thoughts as I tried to anticipate the evening that I should spend with Claude. I put on the black grenadine. It was not so becoming as my coloured dresses; and my face was paler than usual. I felt dissatisfied with myself as I surveyed my figure from head to foot in the long glass, and wondered if Ethel's beauty would far outshine my own. For the moment I felt a pang of jealousy. Then I took my work, and went downstairs. The drawing-room was empty, but the lamp was lighted upon the table, though the shutters were still unclosed. I seated myself by the window which commanded a view of the carriage-drive and the shrubbery beyond; but I could not see far down the drive, on account of its many windings.

"I do hope he will come," I thought, as I strained my ears to catch a sound of the horse's feet upon the gravel. But no sound was heard, and the evening was closing in fast. I looked

round the room, recalling that evening in which I had been seated there before with him ; one of those happy evenings which were so prominent in my memory. As I gazed, my eyes fell upon something which they had not seen before.

It was a cabinet photograph set in a velvet frame, a likeness of Captain Douglas, which was too real to be mistaken. I got up, and taking it in my hand, examined it closely under the lamp, and then carrying it to the window, I gazed at it in the dim twilight. As I turned to replace it upon the table, I was made aware of the presence of Miss Blantyre, who had entered the room so noiselessly that I had not perceived her. I started and blushed guiltily, but she did not appear to have observed me. She was standing at the table with a book in her hand, and now looked up as I put the photograph back into its place.

"That is an excellent likeness, is it not?" she asked carelessly.

"Very," I replied, "quite a speaking likeness, as people say; and I think that is a very suggestive remark, for, really, some pictures do seem to speak to one."

"Yes," she said absently, turning over the leaves of her book, and, fortunately for me, giving me time for the blush to fade from my cheek. "Are you fond of poetry, Miss Hamilton?"

"Yes, I think I am," I answered. "Are you?"

"No, I don't care in the least for it. Never could understand people's taste for it. Blank verse drives me wild, and rhyme sends me to sleep."

"Then you acknowledge that it has some power over you," I said, smiling. "You can appreciate the soothing effects of sentiment and pathos."

"No, I can't; I merely mean that it sends me to sleep like the hymns which my nurse used to sing to me as a baby, and which my

infantile imagination could neither grasp nor appreciate, but which had the same effect as a very deep sermon on a hot day."

A click of the gate down the carriage-drive, and then the sounds of a horse's feet.

Miss Blantyre continued:

"Now, here is Tennyson, which I have tried hard to read since I have been here, because I was told to do so. Some of it makes me sick. 'In Memoriam,' for instance, and that addle-pated creature who was in love with Maud. No wonder she did not marry him. Could you, Miss Hamilton?"

"I really don't know," I said; "that part of the poem never entered into my imagination. I only like it for itself; and it is so fearfully sad."

"Bah! do you think so? If I were she, I should like to have seen him hung."

"Oh, Miss Blantyre, what a terrible idea!"

"Yes, Miss Hamilton, you don't know me yet; never will, perhaps. Few people do; but

what you may discover some day is how terribly I can love and hate."

I looked at this strange girl, who, two hours ago, would not condescend to speak to me, now giving me her confidence freely. She was dressed in some soft shining material, which appeared to be made up of puffings and flounces, and her white neck was surrounded with rich lace. She was of very slender build, and as she leaned against the table, regarding me with a firm, decided glance, her delicate lips closed tightly, I felt that her words were true.

"I have no doubt of it, Miss Blantyre," I replied.

"Yes," she said, poising the book upon the table with one hand, "I daresay you have heard a little about me before you saw me, and probably nothing that was very good; however, that is but of little consequence."

"Indeed, you are mistaken," I answered. "I have heard of you principally from Mrs.

Douglas, and her account made me long to see you."

"To see whether I was the character she represented," she said, laughing. "Well, I acknowledge that I have not Amy's meekness, but, all the same, I should be sorry to change places with her."

"That is fortunate," I answered, "and proves that at least you are not envious."

"Oh, yes, I am. I am dreadfully envious sometimes, but not in that way. I would not have married Mortimer for twice his wealth, he is not good-looking enough, and now she is tied down to him for life, with no further prospect of freedom."

"I hope not, indeed," I said, laughing, "and I am sure she would echo my wish. You seem to have a strange idea of matrimony."

"My idea, so far as I have seen it, is, that it is a mistake," said Miss Blantyre, emphatically.

"Really? Do you prefer single blessedness?"

"Up to a certain point. What is the good of being tied on to one man's coat-tails, without the privilege of even looking at another? Half the charm of my life would be gone."

This was a nice confession truly, but such as I should have expected to hear from the lips of Miss Blantyre.

"You are fond of gentlemen's society?" I said, putting my assertion in the form of a question, and endeavouring to do so as politely as I could.

"Yes," said Miss Blantyre, slowly. "I think I am—when they don't bore me, that is to say. You see, I have always been accustomed to them. My father is in the army, as well as nearly every relative that I have belonging to me, and as the eldest daughter at home, of course I have to entertain these men for Papa."

She spoke so calmly, that I might have sup-

posed it was simply a duty imposed upon her by her father, if I did not happen to have known differently.

"You have no wish to be married, then?" I asked. "If your idea of it is, that it is a mistake, what state of things would you prefer? Being an old maid, perhaps."

"Not for worlds," said Miss Blantyre. "I did not say that I would never marry; I only said that the arrangement was an absurd one, and therefore a mistake. I shall take my freedom as long as it pleases me to do so, and when I marry—which, of course, I must, to avoid opprobrious epithets, and not to make myself a laughing-stock in the world—I shall take care to enjoy myself, and have as much freedom as is compatible with domestic felicity."

"I should be afraid of the domestic felicity not being so great as I desired," I answered. "Your husband must indeed be a model if he permits such a state of things. Independently of his not approving himself,

he might dislike the criticism pronounced upon his wife by the world at large, which very few men can tolerate. But I suppose you will make this arrangement with him beforehand, and let him go his own way also."

"No, I shan't," said Miss Blantyre, "I shall do nothing of the kind; I have never seen the man yet that I could thoroughly trust. Now, I have perfect confidence in myself, and he must have also; but if I choose to have my little friendships with other men I consider that my affair, and he can have nothing to do with them. But with a man it is totally different. The moment that a woman speaks kindly to them they are ready to believe her over head and ears in love with them; if she snubs them, it is a surer proof still; if she is familiar, she is very far gone; and so it ends in their really being silly enough to fall in love with her, a love which is of the most despicable kind, because

it springs from vanity. Bah! the extent of a man's vanity is surprising."

"And you think it isn't so with women?"

"No, certainly not; at least I can answer for one. Men are all very well to make use of, to send one music or flowers, or concert tickets—nay, some may do even to make a friend of, and feel a sisterly liking to; but the worst of it is, as I said before, *they* never know where to stop. The moment one is really kind and pleasant, they immediately think one adores them, and propose instanter, and then one is called a flirt if one does not see matters in the same light."

I was extremely amused. This was the first girl I had ever met with who seemed to belong to the world and its ways. I thought of my own unsophisticated life, and for the first time in it felt thankful for the contrast. How little do we know what is for one's own good; how blindly we fight with destiny, and rebel against fate which we often regard as

ill-luck. How thankfully we look back in the after years, and feel that One in perfect wisdom, perfect love, has been working for the best after all. But here our conversation received a slight check in the entrance of Mr. and Mrs. Douglas, who were followed almost immediately by their brother. Mr. Douglas advanced to me and took me kindly by the hand.

"Glad to see you back again, Miss Hamilton," he said with warmth, while Claude went towards the table by which Miss Blantyre still stood.

"Well, how is the reading progressing?" he asked in his full natural voice, as he touched the book with his hand, which she had just laid down.

"Pretty well," she answered indifferently. "I am trying hard to fancy myself Maud, and wake in the night, fancying that I hear some one shrieking in my ear 'Maud, Maud, Maud, Maud!' like that lunatic lover of hers."

"I am afraid you have not read to much purpose," he said, smiling, "if you have not been able to distinguish him from the rooks; but it is a satisfaction to know that you are sufficiently impressed to be haunted by the book in your dreams."

"Oh, that is not because I am in the least impressed by it," she answered, "for everything haunts me in my dreams. I even eat my dinner twice over."

"A sure sign of indigestion, Ethel," said Mr. Douglas; "I must recommend more open-air exercise. But come to dinner now, for cold soup is not at all good for your present state of health."

He offered her his arm, and she took it, walking towards the door. Of course Captain Douglas gave his to her sister, and then playfully turned to me.

"No thank you," I said firmly. "I like going in alone; it is much more natural. Please let me follow you, Mrs. Douglas."

"No, I will not, indeed. Claude, take her."

"I intend to do so," he said, drawing my hand forcibly within his arm; and conscious of the delight which his command gave me, I suffered him to have his way.

According to his usual custom, he said very little to me during dinner, but as I understood that no slight was meant by it, no thought of disappointment crossed my mind. I watched his manner closely with Miss Blantyre, however, anxious to see whether she impressed him by her beauty; but I noted nothing. She seemed too indifferent even to flirt with him, which I fancied she would have done with all men, while he spoke to her in his free, natural way, which at one time I had not understood.

When we three ladies went back to the drawing-room, Mrs. Douglas and I seated ourselves by the fire, while Ethel crossed the room to the piano, which stood at the further end. She struck one or two chords in a vague,

meaningless way, complaining that the piano wanted tuning, and then broke into a waltz of Chopin's; but while I was still enjoying the strains of it, she had broken off suddenly to a rattling gallop which she jingled over the keys at railway speed.

"That is just like Ethel," said Mrs. Douglas in a low voice. "It illustrates her character perfectly. You never know her mood for two minutes."

"Amy, how do you like this?" she called out from the other end of the room.

"Not half so well as the other; do pray go on with that."

"No, I shan't," was the sisterly reply. "You must listen to this now; I composed it myself last summer, and the band of the 130th played it at one of our balls."

"Indeed?" said Amy, whispering to me; "that was the same regiment to which Captain Blagrove belonged."

I understood by the mysterious communica-

tion, that Captain Blagrove was the gentleman with whom she had just broken off her engagement, and wondered whether it was because he did not choose to submit to her code of laws after marriage.

She ended her gallop in a kind of jumble of which no one could decypher anything, and the idea of which she told me she had gathered from a Gregorian chant and a negro melody combined. I own, however, that even this explanation did not render the idea one whit more intelligible to my own ears. Bang, bang, bang, went the notes. "And which just expresses my own feeling," she said. "I always like to thump them out at the last to illustrate my state of excitement. There, will that do?" She flung hersef back on her chair, with an expression of mock fatigue.

"Oh, Ethel, sing something before you get up," pleaded her sister.

"What shall I sing? You know I only sing things that I can understand. 'Little

Maid of Arcadie' it shall be. I daresay Miss Hamilton never heard it."

But Miss Hamilton had heard it, had heard Claude sing it, and did not care about hearing it from Miss Blantyre's lips after he had rendered it so differently. She sang it straight through, however, for a wonder, and then began a snatch of "Si tu savais," and then a deep voice, taking up the melody, rang softly through the room and blended with hers. He took his place beside her, and when she had finished, asked her for another song.

"Will you sing 'La ci darem'?" she asked.

"Yes, if you wish it."

So they sang that also, while I watched them with eyes which were not so free from anxiety as I would wish them to have been. How silly I was; there was nothing in the world to excite my feelings of jealousy, unless it might have been the coquettish glance which she cast upward from her beautiful dark eyes, and the smile which curved her thin red lips. Claude

noticed her no more than if she had been a playful spaniel at his feet, and when it was finished walked across the room to where I was sitting.

She pouted for a moment, then got up, and humming the air which she had just ceased singing, began arranging her music.

"Not very polite to allow me to perform these menial offices," she called towards him, as she saw him take a seat by the fire.

"Pray don't, then," he said carelessly; "I daresay one of the servants might be induced to put away your music if it was left on the piano till morning."

"But that is untidy, and I have been brought up with the idea that we should help ourselves, and not leave everything to the servants."

"An excellent precept; I am glad to see that you profit by it."

"And I have also been brought up with the idea that a gentleman should never allow a lady to wait upon herself."

"Also an excellent moral," said Claude, without moving. "Don't close the piano; I wish to hear Miss Hamilton sing."

But the piano was shut down with a bang which made every string vibrate. Apparently the young lady had not heard the remark.

I smiled as I bent over my work. I had not sung for some months now, and had no desire to do so.

"Please, spare my efforts to-night," I said, glancing at him, though the smile was still upon my lips.

"Certainly," said Mrs. Douglas, over her embroidery. "You must not tease her, Claude. Leave her alone, and let her talk to me."

"By all means," he answered, taking up a book.

Ethel followed his example, and curling herself up in a corner of the sofa, pencil in hand, appeared to be making marginal notes in her volume of Tennyson. Mr. Douglas read the newspaper, and after a while fell asleep over it. Mrs. Douglas and I chatted together softly.

"I am expecting visitors soon," she said in a low voice. "Lady Barthwick is coming again for a week or two, and my sister-in-law, Miss Douglas."

"Indeed?" I asked carelessly, though I did not feel quite so indifferent. Lady Barthwick had been very kind to me, and she was Claude's mother—would, perhaps, be my mother one day.

Though I did not know who my father was, I felt a conviction that his position had been far above that which he held in the world at present, and I pictured to myself the impression that would be made when this was known. The sudden thought flushed my cheek, and the fire was warm. I pushed back my chair almost into a line with Claude's, and the action attracted his attention.

"Pray change seats with me," he said, rising, and offering me his own. "I do not feel the heat too great; I am chilly, in fact."

"No; do not move," I entreated. "I am only

a little warm, and wished to move my chair farther back. I can do it, thank you,"—for he had put out his hand at the same moment in which I had. As I grasped the back of the chair, his hand touched mine, and he gently pressed it. I was standing in front of the chair, thereby intercepting the view of this action from Mrs. Douglas; but as I turned to seat myself, a pair of eyes from the corner of the sofa was taking in these details with a half-contemptuous smile. I reddened with mortification. Was this young lady already beginning to show her power over me?

After sitting a few minutes longer, during which I fumed inwardly, I rose and signified my intention of going to bed. But I was not to slip away so easily as I thought. I had barely time to reach my candle from the hall-table, when I heard a step behind me, and Claude came forward, offering his services to light my way. I gave him the candle without a word till we had reached the upper

landing; but there he stopped and confronted me.

"Good-night," he said, putting out his hand and taking mine within it in his strong grasp. "Good-night." Then glancing at my black dress, he added, "Poor little girl; did you think I had forgotten you all this time?"

"No," I answered, while I bent my head in the happy consciousness of his love.

"Have you thought of me much?"

"Very much," I said boldly.

"Always with trust?"

The words were in a whisper now, dropping out one by one, as the hand-pressure became stronger.

"Always. I will trust you, because you have asked me to do so, although I may not understand you. If you will promise to make yourself plain to me one day, I will trust you to the end."

"God bless you!" he said earnestly, catch-

ing my hand with a quick gesture, and lifting it to his lips.

But I wrenched it forcibly away.

"No, no," I said hastily, though a flood of joy rushed over my very soul; "that cannot be—you must never kiss my hand till——"

"Till what?"

"Till then," I faltered, crimson to the temples.

"Very well," he answered, dropping my hand suddenly; "I will remember not to take liberties again with *Mrs. Douglas' governess.*" He repeated the words emphatically.

"Don't," I said, stamping my foot with a little flutter of annoyance. "You know what I mean; you must, you shall understand that I could not allow it."

"Perfectly," he answered in a louder tone, which sounded chilling after this warmth of manner. "Good-night, Miss Hamilton; pleasant dreams to you."

I looked hurriedly at his face, and read the

same pleasant smile in it which I knew so well; but the words were formal. There must be a reason for them, surely.

In another moment an exquisitely shaped head came in sight, and then a slight graceful figure ascended the upper stairs. But in those sparkling eyes I read a glance which was not altogether pleasing.

"She is a flirt," I said to myself as I wandered down the long passage to my own room, leaving her standing beside him, where I had just stood. "She is a flirt. But then, Claude knows it."

## CHAPTER X.

### ETHEL'S CONFESSIONS.

"I would be a mermaid fair;
I would sing to myself the whole of the day;
With a comb of pearl I would comb my hair;
And still as I combed I would sing and say,
'Who is it loves me? who loves not me?' . . .
But if any came near I would call and shriek,
And adown the steep like a wave I would leap,
For I would not be kissed by all who would list,
Though they sue me and woo me and flatter me."

*Tennyson.*

THE days slipped away rapidly as heretofore, but I was more in the company of my little pupils than formerly. I did not care to join in the gaieties downstairs. Though visitors came and

went, afternoon teas and dinner-parties were given, I had very little share in them. Independently of my deep mourning, my letters from home were not very cheerful; for though my father made light of his troubles, I knew that they weighed heavily upon him. Many bitter and secret tears were shed in the solitude of my own room, known, as I believed, to myself only, and though Mrs. Douglas often urged me to come down to the drawing-room, I shunned it entirely, except when they were alone.

Ethel Blantyre and I were by way of being great friends. She amused and fascinated me, as I suppose she amused and fascinated everyone. Any fear that I might have had concerning her power over Captain Douglas was quite dissipated as soon as I had the opportunity of seeing them much together. He seemed so indifferent to her that I was sure of his own safety, and her manner with him, though playful and imperious, as it was to all, was just

what she had led me to suppose it would be, in her conversation of the first evening. She appeared to try and make use of him without anything like love-making. Never did two people understand each other more thoroughly. He fetched and carried for her, paid her broad open compliments, and sometimes called her "Ethel," while she spoke to him much in the same manner as she did to her brother-in-law.

Of course I could not say how they behaved when they were not in my presence. They rode and hunted together, went to balls, to dinner and evening parties. Jokes often passed between them about the events which took place at these gatherings; sometimes I was admitted into their secrets, appealed to by both, and yet there was never a word, nor a look which could make me uneasy. He was so different towards me, so infinitely more gentle and tender when he had the rare opportunity of speaking to me alone, that I was always doubly reassured for any misgivings

which I had indulged in, and, in spite of my many private anxieties and griefs, felt on that score, at least, contented.

I could not say that Ethel's was altogether a character which I admired in the abstract, but she was what men call "great fun." She was not clever exactly, but she was sharp; quick at repartee, and never at a loss for an answer. We found this as much in our own circle as when she was surrounded by her many admirers, and both her sister and I laughed, and gave way to her. She petted and patronised me, called me "Ellie" in the same way, I suppose, that she spoke of "Burtie," and of her little dog "Fide." She said that the last-named was the only male creature that she had ever found faithful, and even his temper was tried sometimes by her caprices. Occasionally she was confidential, would pour out her many woes into my ear, and declare how ill-used she was, and even though the ill-usage mainly seemed to consist in every man that she had met with

falling in love with her, I could not help feeling sorry for her.

"Why do you encourage them in this manner if you only despise them afterwards?" I ventured one day to inquire.

"My dear Ellie, that is just were you are so excessively dense. I don't encourage them, I try to do the most outlandish things in the world, and yet their vanity is so great that they think I am ready to worship them."

"But you must lead them to suppose so," I replied, "or they would not think it. I don't know much about the world, but I can't fancy any man proposing to me unless I really cared for him, and showed him that I did so."

"Well, now, I will just tell you. One night we went to a stupid, stupid party, at Sir Thomas Beaton's, where there were about five men to every woman in the room. That was an odd coincidence, you will think, but so it was, and I must say that the poor male creatures had not much choice among the ladies."

"Were they so ugly?" I asked.

"Oh! not only ugly; they had no manners. Two were shy, unsophisticated young things, who hung on to their mother's skirts, and blushed when they were spoken to; two were gushing little creatures of five-and-thirty, with very *crêpé* hair, very low dresses, and very silly manners; one squinted; another was loud in her voice, and laughed like a man. Altogether, how could I blame myself when I found that I had no less than fifteen men round me at supper, each one anxious to wait upon me? One held my fan, another my handkerchief, one a plate of game pie, a fourth some champagne, a fifth jellie, a sixth ——"

"Oh, pray don't enumerate the duties of all fifteen," I said, laughing, "I will imagine the rest."

"Well, of course, 'I had a smile for all,' like the merry Zingari. I bowed to this one, smiled to that, took jelly off one plate and cold turkey from another, and, when Mamma wasn't look-

ing, allowed one to feed me with trifle, and gave him my champagne to sip."

"Ethel!" I exclaimed, blushing at the thought of it.

"You needn't get so red about it," she said, laughing, "I had to amuse them somehow. And he drank the champagne from the very spot where I had, and then brought me another glass."

"I am glad to hear that he did that," I said; "I thought perhaps you had sipped it also."

"No, I didn't do that. But, of course, after all this excitement I began to wonder who my real partner was, so I singled out one of the nearest to me, and led him off."

"With the other fourteen trooping after you, I suppose?"

"No, they stayed behind for a little while, and during the interval this awful muff took the opportunity of making me an offer, just because I had shown him this preference, I suppose. He said that he had long thought of it,

that he could not be happy without me, &c. &c., and begged me to look favourably upon him."

"And what did you do?"

"Oh, I couldn't be unkind to him, you know. I said I would think it over, the idea had not occurred to me, that I was not sure what Papa would say, &c. &c., and there left him."

"But you saw him afterwards?"

"No; the next day he wrote to Papa, and I, of course, was very much surprised, and begged the Pater to decline with thanks. Fortunately, that ended him."

"How could you do it in such a way?"

"My dear child, if you had had as much of it as I have, you would learn to be cool too. Wait, you haven't heard the end. Presently the other arrived upon the scene, he of the champagne, and did precisely the same thing. I dissembled with him at first, made an atrocious pun, and said I knew it was sham pain; and very likely it was the effect of that."

"Ethel!" I exclaimed, reproachfully again.

"Oh, you may say 'Ethel' if you choose; so did he. I gave him the same reply as I had given to the other; only in this case I took a week for reflection instead of a day. Well, do you know, that is not all? I had no less than three offers that night, though I behaved atrociously. I took up Lady Beaton's little dog, and danced a set of lancers with him in my arms, which prevented my hand being squeezed too often. And after all that, I overheard two men talking as I got into the carriage, and saying what a flirt I was. So much for the world and its opinion."

She was sitting on the schoolroom-table, tossing up an india-rubber ball and catching it as it fell. Her dark blue cashmere dress fitting closely, revealed her slight figure and unusually small waist. I often wondered whether Ethel could be accused of tight lacing.

"Then, Ethel, you have never really cared

for anyone?" I asked, my anxieties being greatly relieved by these confessions.

"I don't know," she answered, a slight shade of colour flitting across her face, while she continued to toss the ball. "Sometimes I have fancied myself in love, but it has generally ended in nothing."

"What do you mean by nothing? That you have refused him as soon as he asked you to marry him?"

"No, not at all; I haven't refused everyone," and the tinge of colour deepened a little; "I have actually been engaged twice, and would have been before that, only Papa would not hear of it."

"How many more confessions am I to hear," I asked with amused surprise. "Three offers in one night, three engagements—that makes six at least."

"Stop a moment," she said, beginning to enumerate them on her fingers; "seven—seven altogether, and one poor fellow who died."

I felt greatly shocked, and yet there was something about her flippant tone which interested me.

"Did he die for love of you?" I asked more gravely.

"No, I don't think so; the poor fellow was always more or less seedy. He was a good deal older than I was, and he went to India, where he kicked the bucket."

"How can you use such expressions?" I asked reprovingly; "I never heard any girl talk in that way in my life."

"No, my love, because you have been brought up piously."

"But apart from that," I said, "it seems so heartless to speak in such a manner of anyone who loved you, even if you didn't care for him."

"I don't know whether he loved me exactly, and I ought not to have included him, I suppose; only you asked how many offers I had, so I told you."

"Then if he made you an offer, we will suppose that he had some regard for you."

"Well, perhaps he had," she said indifferently, tossing up her ball again. "He didn't propose to me, he was much too proper for that. He asked Papa in a formal sort of way, and he gave him an answer. I had precious little to do with it, so I don't think I ought to be called heartless for not tumbling into a state of mind bordering upon insanity because my father forbade the banns."

"I wonder he did so, I 'm sure, when you gave him so much trouble. How glad he will be when you are fairly off his hands!"

"Yes, I daresay he will; and Mamma will be delighted, I 'm sure; but I 'm not going off their hands just yet."

She had never alluded to her last engagement, of which Mrs. Douglas had spoken, and I was too timid to introduce the subject, but now I said:

"Tell me about some of those people who

have been so interested in you. I should like to know something of them."

Her face tinged over again with a little flush of pink as she answered:

"I shan't tell you their names. I don't mind telling you a little about them, if you want to know."

"Yes, I should like to hear about those to whom you have been engaged. How odd it must have been to know people in that manner, and then break off all intimacy with them."

"Awfully funny," she said, bursting into a fit of amused laughter; "I can't tell you how funny it is." But her face was really tinged with blushes now.

"Then why did you do it?" I asked.

"For various reasons. I am not hard to please, but men are so troublesome."

"How do you find them troublesome?"

"My dear Ellie, surely you know. The first time I was engaged it was to a young lieutenant without a penny, before I was seven-

teen. He was awfully spooney about me, but Papa was dreadfully angry and forbade him the house. I cried my eyes out, declared I should drown myself, and used to kiss a lock of his hair every night—the only thing of his which I possessed—'Till another came to woo, Then again the roses grew,'" she sang; "and then I had another flirtation. This time it was to a parson—a long-coated, white-chokered mortal, that I tried to hate with all my might. But he talked so goody to me when I was going to be confirmed that he converted me."

"And so you fell in love with him?"

"No, I didn't exactly. I tell you I tried to hate him, but he really was very good. It ended in my liking him very much, and wanting to be a better girl, and before I knew where I was he had popped the question, and I was done for."

"Did your father approve this time?" I asked.

"Well, yes; I think so on the whole. He

hadn't a penny himself, but had expectations from a superannuated uncle, who was warranted not to live long, and I believed myself much too pious to be given over to filthy lucre. But after a time he got fearfully slow; he was always lecturing me about my behaviour, and didn't like me to flirt with anyone else. Oh dear! it makes me laugh now when I think of it."

"The lectures, do you mean?"

"No, the whole style of thing. We would go to a picnic, or a croquet party together, and he would say to me beforehand, 'Ethel, my love, promise me that you will not talk too much to Captain Dash to-day. It is unseemly, my dear, to flirt in the manner you do, when you are engaged to me. Not that I object in the least for myself, not at all, oh dear no." That style of thing, you know."

"Yes, I know," I said, laughing.

"Well, of course, no one could stand that; so I told him one day, when we were going to

a picnic, that I had made an engagement to drive in the same carriage with Captain Dash, and that if he didn't like it he had better not go. He said at once that he very strongly disapproved of such behaviour, and that I grieved him by my misconduct; and then I told him that I wouldn't be lectured, and that I was bored to death by his everlasting preaching."

"Oh, Ethel, how naughty!"

"Yes, I daresay it was; but such a saint and such a sinner could never have lived together under one roof. I don't think there was one thing which I really enjoyed, of which he approved. It was always 'My dear Ethel, that was not wise; my love, you should be more careful.' And his hair nearly stood on end, one day, when I said, 'Oh, Joseph, how much nicer you would be if you only showed a little more of the cloven foot.'"

"I don't wonder," I said laughing; "but was his name really Joseph?"

"No, it was not; I shan't tell you what

his name was, it isn't part of the bargain. It is sufficient for you to know that the uncle is defunct, and that he is now the proprietor of a fat living, with a wife and eleven children."

"Eleven children!" I repeated; "how long ago did all this take place, then?"

"About six years ago," said Ethel demurely, "when I was eighteen, you know."

"Then he couldn't have eleven children," I said, laughing.

"Couldn't he? Well, I don't know; how many, then? Twins every year for five years, how many does that make?"

"Ten, I suppose," I answered.

"Well, perhaps it's ten. At any rate, it's a good round number."

"So I should think," I said quietly.

"Well, that was an end of him, and I was thankful to get rid of him. Then came the Indian man who died of yellow fever, but I can't say that I ever felt the slightest romance for him. Next came a very long and strong

leather. Why, my dear Ellie, we should only have a thousand a year, and the distant prospect of a title."

"Then you would probably have more money," I said.

"Yes; but who is going to wait for another defunct uncle or father? Not I. Besides, I have made up my mind that I never will be engaged to anyone as long as I live."

"I thought you said the other day that you would not be an old maid."

"Neither will I."

"And how are you going to avoid it if you won't be engaged to anyone?"

"Mark my emphatic words, my love; I said nothing of being married—I used the word 'engaged.' I will never be engaged to any man again as long as I live."

"My dear Ethel, how will you avoid it?"

"By marrying him straight off. Up to that blissful moment we must remain as free as we are now."

"And suppose he does not agree to this arrangement?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Then he must give me up and be content."

I own that this conversation went far to strengthen my own convictions about her. Secure as I felt of Claude, I had had various misgivings about herself, this girl whose moods were so variable. But now that she showed me her natural self so completely, I thought no harm of her. She was heart-whole at present, so far as he was concerned, and likely to remain so. With all her nonsense, with all her love of admiration, it was pure fun and coquetry which led her on to her many escapades.

One morning, in the beginning of April, I was taking a walk with the children along the road to Wentworth. It was one of those fresh spring days when a lingering suspicion of frost still hangs upon the atmosphere, while the sun's rays feel oppressive. The birds were singing

joyously in the branches overhead, and the fields and hedges were already becoming clothed in their summer attire. Everything seemed to smile with delight at the return of spring—everything but myself, I imagine, for my own eyes were weeping copious tears. I had had a letter from Agnes that morning, written in very low spirits. She had gone home to stay with our father, taking Mildred with her, in the hope of cheering him a little, but the old house was insupportable. My father had sold the little trap, and only kept the brougham and one horse ; one maid-servant only remained, and a boy whom we had had for two years ; but Agnes said that a sad change had come over everything, and that my father looked more ill and wretched than she had ever seen him. She made but little allusion to Lady Constance, but said that my father had more time to pay visits now than he had formerly. I understood this to be a delicate allusion to the decrease of patients, and felt

depressed accordingly. Agnes then went on to say that Halton was quite a different place from what it used to be.

"Somehow," she said, "the people have changed their opinion of dear Father, and instead of the cordiality with which he used to be treated, he only meets with cold and suspicious glances. Of course he says nothing to me, but I see it only too plainly. I believe it is Mr. Thorburn's doing, and that horrid, horrid George; but be careful how you comment upon this, for everything seems to get known, and even I hear the strange stories which are floating about."

I drew out my handkerchief and wiped my streaming eyes. My heart was full to bursting, and yet there was no one to whom I could impart my grief. Suddenly the sound of a horse's feet was heard upon the crisp morning air, and a horseman overtook us on his way from the Court. I knew the sound of Dick's well-known even trot too well to mistake it,

but I was surprised to see Captain Douglas at this hour of the day. It was barely ten o'clock. I hastily thrust my letter into my pocket, and drew my crape veil over my face.

"Good morning, Picaninnies; good morning, Miss Hamilton," he shouted as he approached; then swinging himself to the ground, he walked along beside me.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he said in a low voice. "I have just been to the Court, and was wondering what had become of you."

"Didn't Ethel tell you we were out?" I asked.

"She said she didn't know where you were; thought you were in the schoolroom."

"Naughty girl!" I said, smiling feebly, "to tell you such a fib. She knew that we had gone for a walk."

"She forgot it, perhaps," said Captain Douglas.

"No, I don't think she could, because

she begged me to stay and practise with her."

"Why don't you put up your veil?" he asked abruptly, looking at me. "This fresh morning air can't do you any good with that thing tied over your face. Let me see you."

I lifted my veil, fearful, however, that the tell-tale traces of my tears lingered still upon my cheek. I had scarcely alluded to my grief in speaking to Claude, but of course I felt that he must understand it.

"Poor darling!" he said tenderly; "have you been crying?"

His kind words nearly caused me to burst out afresh, but I restrained myself.

"I have had a letter from my sister," I answered, "which naturally makes me sad."

"No bad news in it, I trust, though? I thought your sisters were at Milford?"

"Not just now," I answered; "they have gone home again. But it is very wretched."

"Yes, it must be."

The thought of it all filled my eyes with tears once more. Why should I not tell him? He was almost *my* Claude, the dearest friend I had in the world. In another moment I had poured it all out; the sad accident which had caused my mother's death, the doubtful verdict, and the cloud which had hung over my father ever since. I suppressed all allusion to the Thorburns, or the unfortunate intimacy with Lady Constance.

Claude listened in profound silence while my pent-up grief had its course.

"Now, can you wonder, after that, that I am miserable, and that I do not care to come downstairs or talk as formerly?"

"No, I do not, indeed," he said gently; "I am more sorry than I can express."

"How good you are!" I said gratefully; "how very kind and good of you to feel for me so much."

"However, crying won't help it, you know. Try to be brave, and never show the world

your feelings — that would never do, you know."

"I know that well," I answered, checking back a bursting, sobbing sigh. "I have told you because I know how well I can trust you, but you are my only confidant."

"Not Ethel Blantyre, I hope?"

"Not for anything!" I cried. "She is very amusing, and I like her extremely, but she is the last person I should go to for sympathy."

"But you must not shut yourself up too much," he said in the same tone. "You will come down to-night after dinner, will you not?"

"Are you going to be there?" I asked.

"Yes; my mother and sister are coming, and, of course, I must help to entertain them."

"Very well. Then I will come," I said.

"And now I must be getting back to Wentworth as fast as possible, for it is growing late. Good-bye, monkeys. *Au revoir*, Miss Hamilton; keep up your spirits."

He smiled his bright smile as he mounted into the saddle, but he did not take my hand; well, of course, that was unnecessary, as we were to meet so soon again.

Feeling that I must now try to amuse the children, I began to bowl Edyth's hoop for her, and very soon they were laughing merrily over her futile attempts to make it go straight, for it invariably rolled either into the gutter or into the hedge.

The sound of a horse's rapid steps were behind us once more; and this time Miss Ethel Blantyre came flying past us, followed at a distance by the groom.

Her cheek was flushed with the exercise, and her dark eyes sparkled with health and mischief. She made us a little military salute as she passed, and then tore on rapidly in the direction of Wentworth.

"Where can she be going?" I muttered half aloud to myself.

"I know," said Lilian; "she 's going to

catch Uncle Claude. Look how fast she is riding. When I'm grown up I mean to ride like that."

"Yes," I thought, "I should not wonder if you resembled your aunt in many respects.

"I wonder if she means to go into Wentworth," said Mabel. "She 'll be a very naughty girl if she does, to ride like that foo the street."

"P'aps the horse is running away," suggested Edyth.

I tried to allay these fears, and told them a story to amuse them; but by this time it was getting sufficiently late to return to the house, and we retraced our steps. Whether Miss Blantyre succeeded in catching Uncle Claude I cannot say; in about the space of twenty minutes we saw her appear again, and checking her horse, she drew up beside us.

"What a glorious morning!" she exclaimed, as she walked the poor creature, now covered with foam, at a slow pace. "Oh, the delights

of riding! Ellie, why don't you come out sometimes?"

"You know I can't," I said reproachfully. "How can you tantalize me by asking the question?"

"Stop," she said, as I turned my face towards her. "Let's have a look at you. By Jove! I believe you've been crying."

My tell-tale blush corroborated her words.

"What was it about?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said; "at least, it had nothing to do with you, or anyone but myself."

"And Uncle Claude," put in Lilian. "It had something to do with him, I'm sure, because he looked so unhappy, and Miss Hamilton and he talked about it."

"Did he?" said Ethel, laughing. "Do tell me some more, Lily; this is growing quite interesting.

My face grew crimson.

"It had nothing to do with him," I said, angrily, and you are a very naughty little girl,

Lilian. It is my own affair quite, to be known to no one but myself."

"And Claude Douglas," said Ethel teasingly. "Oh, Ellie, what a deep one you are! and you pretend to be so good and proper and all that sort of thing."

"You may think what you please," I said, the angry flush still on my cheek. "Of course I can't help your thoughts; but I assure you my unhappiness is my own, to be shared by no one."

"Very well, my dear, I will ask no more questions." She looked at me demurely, and after a few more shallow remarks which irritated me, broke her horse into a trot again. She seemed in the gayest spirits: a contrast to me who, heart-broken and miserable, felt oppressed even by the songs of the birds.

We returned to the house, and I went at once to my room. Throwing my letter into the open desk on my table, I sat down and

burst into tears. Then rousing myself after a few minutes, I determined to be brave, as Claude had told me; to put away from me my own pain and strive to do my duty.

So by dint of all the lessons and practice we had to go through, my face had assumed a more cheerful aspect by luncheon, and Ethel's wild prattle fairly made me laugh before it was over.

"What is it?" she said, twining her arm within mine when luncheon was over. "I know something has vexed you to-day, and I would give half a sov' to know it! Has it anything to do with me?"

"With you!" I echoed. "No, certainly not. I told you, this morning, it concerns me only."

"And Uncle Claude," said Ethel, merrily.

"No, indeed, it does not. It is a letter which I had this morning from home. You know I lost my mother lately; isn't it natural that my home letters should be sad?"

"Yes, of course; I forgot that," said Ethel, in a changed tone. "Poor little Ellie, I am sorry for you. Here, give me a kiss." And she took her handkerchief, and smoothed over my brow. "There, I am glad to see you better," as I smiled at the action. "Be a man and bear it like a man."

"I would rather not," I said, smiling. "I would rather be a woman, a great deal."

"I wouldn't," said Ethel. "Men have a great deal the best of it. They can do as they please, and nobody calls them fast or forward, or unwomanly. Now everything I do is commented upon in that way."

"Is it?"

"Yes. If Papa had only seen me riding along the road to-day, shouldn't I have caught it?"

"I don't wonder," I said. "I thought you wished to break your neck. What were you doing it for?"

"I had a motive," said Miss Blantyre, "a

motive that would not be good for you to know, and therefore I shan't tell you."

"Very well," I answered, feeling amused. I believed Lilian's statement to be true, and that she had gone after Claude. Well, I hoped she was gratified if she did meet him. I was very sure that he was not.

## CHAPTER XI.

### SHADOWS.

"Get thee hence, nor come again,
Mix not memory with doubt."

*Tennyson.*

About five o'clock on that same afternoon, when Ethel was driving with her sister, and I was sitting with the children in their schoolroom at tea, our attention was arrested by the sound of an arrival. The large carriage was driving up to the door, and presently the sound of Claude's voice came through the open window.

The children sprang up and looked out.

"There 's Grandmamma!" exclaimed Lilian, ready to fly instantly.

My heart beat quickly, and with a slight pang also, for I could not help chafing at the thought of my inability to go down and give one who might be dear to me one day, a warm welcome.

"Sit still, Lilian," I said irritably; "you can't go till you are sent for."

Dead silence followed in the schoolroom after this remark, the children listening eagerly for any fresh sounds from below. We heard Burton go down and speak to the footman, then the house door closed, the carriage drove away, and stillness prevailed for a time; then voices were heard indistinctly at the end of the passage, but growing louder as footsteps approached our door, and at length Claude ushered in his mother and sister.

"Here 's Grandmamma, here 's Aunt Helen. What have you to say to them?"

The children rose, with sticky fingers and

greasy mouths, to receive the greeting from their relatives. I rose also as the elder lady put out her hand and shook mine kindly.

"Well, children, you have not forgotten Aunt Nellie?" said the younger lady as she stooped down to kiss them.

She had not paid me the compliment of even a bow, and I felt it, but now her brother introduced us.

"Helen, this is Miss Hamilton—my sister." Then we inclined our heads—I, even more stiffly than she.

It was evident that my name had not been mentioned to her before, and she had probably never thought of my existence till now. What was I, after all, but the children's attendant? I could not expect that everyone would be as kind as Mrs. Douglas was, and yet I felt the slight, coming from Claude's sister—who might be mine one day.

"I suppose the children may run away and have their pretty faces reduced to their natural

complexion, may they not?" suggested Claude, addressing himself to me.

"By all means," I answered, sending them into the nursery, and ringing the bell for some more tea. "You will take a cup of tea, I hope, Lady Barthwick?"

I felt myself bound to do the honours, seeing that Claude had not allowed the duty to rest upon his own shoulders. He walked across to the little piano which stood open in one corner with a piece of very juvenile music upon it, and after striking one or two chords began to hum an operatic air idly to himself. His sister took her seat by the window looking out into the carriage-drive below, while Lady Barthwick talked pleasantly to me.

I looked at Miss Douglas' face from time to time, as she sat thus without speaking, and came to the conclusion that she had once been good-looking. She was considerably older than Claude, and had a firm mouth and regular features, but there was a pensive, almost care-

worn look in her face now, though she did not seem unhappy. She continued her gaze, until the gate from the shrubbery was heard; then she rose to her feet.

"Here is Amy," she said, "and Ethel Blantyre too. Is she staying here, Claude?"

"Yes," he answered indifferently, pausing over his song; "didn't you know it?"

"No. How could I, if nobody said so?"

"You have no objection, I hope?" said Claude in the same manner, without turning his head.

"Not in the least," she answered; "I suppose she has as good a right here as I have." And then she sat down again without speaking. I did not think that her tone, however, was quite so hearty as the words might have implied, and drew my own conclusions.

But presently the sprightly voices of the little matron and her sister announced their approach, and, running in from the long passage, Mrs. Douglas threw herself into her mother-in-

law's arms and received her with a shower of kisses, while I stood by, envious that my turn had not yet come. She was dressed in grey from head to foot, with a gleam of pink from soft blush-roses, forming a delicious contrast to her sombre attire. In her dress of silk and velvet, and her charming little hat, Ethel looked far more beautiful than her sister, but I knew which character I preferred.

"Are you not awfully glad to see me, Miss Douglas?" she said, going up to that lady, and kissing her as she spoke, with a roguish twinkle in her dark eyes.

"Well, I don't know, Ethel," answered Miss Douglas, laughing; "it depends upon how you are going to behave."

"Oh, I have grown so good now," she said in a lower tone of voice; "I don't flirt a bit." She cocked her head on one side, and looked at her saucily.

"I don't believe it," said Miss Douglas.

"Then I can't help it," she said, pouting.

"You never would believe anything I said, so you must continue to doubt me." She glanced across at Claude also, as she spoke, as if the remark might refer to him as well as to his sister; but he had his back still turned to us, having taken his place upon the music-stool again, after handing the tea-cups round.

"When you have learned to behave properly I will believe in you with pleasure," said Miss Douglas in the same tone.

"Ellie, isn't this hard?" appealed Ethel, throwing herself at my feet; "when I have been such a model for all these weeks. You will speak well for me, won't you?" and she looked into my face with that pensive look that she could so well assume.

Claude turned round upon his music-stool, and looked at us both—at me in my deep mourning dress, and her in her silks and velvet. There was no doubt that he contrasted us in his mind, for his look rested upon

her face for an instant, and then scanned mine briefly. I felt that the contrast was unfavourable; for though I was aware of my own good looks, my beauty was as nothing to this exquisite creature. Then he got up silently and walked towards the window at which his sister was sitting, entering into conversation with her exclusively, till the children came in again and formed another interruption to Ethel's frivolous speeches. Another half-hour was spent with them before the ladies separated, but I remained for the rest of the evening alone. I knew that there was to be a dinner-party that day, and felt far more inclination to stay by myself than join the party in the drawing-room afterwards, as I had been invited to do. How could I participate in pleasures when all my home-thoughts were so painful, when my father was living under a cloud which threw its shadow over his children as well? I would not contemplate, I would not realise the nature of that cloud;

whether it would at length burst over our heads in a loud thunder-clap and hurl its lightning darts upon us, or whether it would gradually fade till the light which was hidden from us would shine once more and gild our path with brightness. "We must live it down," I murmured to myself. "It must pass from us when our father's worth is better understood." Alas! I had not at that moment discovered the true cause for his decline in public opinion.

The dressing-bell had rung; the ladies, I knew, must have gone to their rooms, and the little ones were in the nursery. It was a relief to feel that I was absolutely free, and in some ways it was sweet to be alone. I would go down to the drawing-room and get a book from the table—one of those numerous novels which I had seen scattered about there for the amusement of the guests. I ran hastily down-stairs, across the hall, and entered the long passage without meeting with anyone. But

as I reached the drawing-room door, the sound of voices within the room attracted my attention, and I paused abruptly upon the threshold. Captain Douglas and Ethel were standing by the window, he with his elbow resting upon the back of a high old-fashioned arm-chair, she playing with the tassel of the blind. She had a volume of Tennyson in her hand, which she had apparently just been reading, and one finger of her left hand still marked the place. But it was not of Tennyson she was speaking now; the words which caught my ear fell upon it with a sharp, sudden sound, though there was, perhaps, nothing in them to cause the pain which darted through me.

"There can be but one opinion, I should think, and evidently it is so; there is not the slightest doubt that he killed her."

Of whom was she speaking? Of what? A thrill of horror passed over me, but I walked calmly towards the table.

"I beg your pardon, I have come for a

book," I said. "Did I not see 'Middlemarch,' upon the table an hour or two ago?"

"Oh, Ellie, how you startled me!" said Ethel, suddenly turning. "What book did you want? May I help you?"

Her face was flushed as she made a pretence of searching for it on the table.

"No," I said coldly. "I can find it; here it is, thank you."

I walked back to the door, shutting it tightly after me; then rushed with trembling footsteps to my bedroom. Why did I resent her words? What could they have to do with me? I remembered this when I had reached my room, and also that I had not once looked at Claude's face, and that he had neither spoken nor moved. I paced up and down my room agitated, and half wild with excitement. Could Claude have betrayed me? Was it possible that he in whom I had trusted so implicitly had indeed turned traitor, had repeated my confidence to her, Ethel Blantyre, to whom I

would not have imparted my secret for worlds? The thought was sickening. Apart from the horror which her expressed opinion made me feel, the agony was doubly great by this last supposition. What a miserable world it was! My last consolation had been in the sense of Claude's love, and my trust in him; but now—if he should fail me, what charm could life have for me in the future?

And then this other terrible nameless trial. Could he, too, believe in the possibility of my father's guilt? And if he believed in it, could he discuss the question coolly with Ethel, the pros and cons which might arise from it? Were they both false, mean, treacherous, using me as a foil for their own ends? After all, I might be mistaken; they might have been talking of a book, of one of the novels which contain such dark mysteries; they could not have spoken of my affairs in that way. It was impossible for Ethel to know unless Claude had told her, and that he would never do.

"Never," I repeated emphatically, in my longing to assure myself of his innocence; and yet, what other means had she of obtaining information?

I stopped short in the middle of my walk. There was Burton, she who had condoled with me for my sudden loss; could she have heard the current report from Halton, wafted over to Wentworth through any of the servants, and, having heard it, could she have mentioned it to Ethel? I would try her. She would probably bring up my dinner after it had come from the dining-room, and then I would ask her. I tried to calm myself till this certainty was made known, and, opening my book, believed that I was reading. But the words danced before my eyes, as I repeated them over and over again, and would contain neither sense nor meaning to my weary heart and brain. I knew it was nearly dinner-time, and the room was too dark to see the page before me. The little ones had been up to say good-night, and

I was still sitting, trying vainly to decypher the hieroglyphics before my eyes, when a gentle tap came to the door, and the rustle of a silk dress was heard. No need to tell me that it was Ethel, her voice left no further doubt upon my mind.

"Ellie, what are you doing all alone in the dark?" she asked in her careless, sprightly manner. "Do light your candles, I want to show you my new dress."

I rose from my seat with a faint apology, and, lighting the two tall candles upon the toilet-table, turned my face towards her.

"How white you look!" she said, as if surprised at my appearance. "How stupid of you to sit moping up here in the dark. Do put on a cheerful face before you come downstairs. There; what do you think of me?"

Ah! What did I think of her? I hardly knew. But it was her dress, not herself, which I was called upon to admire, and upon this I could pronounce an unqualified opinion. It

was composed of pale blue silk and tulle, set off by the pearl ear-rings and necklace which touched her soft neck. I admired them with genuine warmth, and she allowed me to examine them closely.

"The pearls were Mamma's," she said, "my own Mother's, I mean. Are they not lovely? I wonder if anyone will think of the Miller's Daughter when they see them to-night. You must excuse me for quoting Tennyson now, but I feel it to be my duty; and besides, that song takes my fancy more than anything in the book."

"Does it?" I said, wearily, feeling her chatter oppressive.

"Yes, don't you like it? Perhaps you have forgotten it, I will send you up the book." Then kissing me, she added. "Now be a good girl, and make yourself pretty to come downstairs."

"I am not coming downstairs to-night, Ethel, I have a headache."

"Nonsense, Ella, it would do you good; you have looked white and miserable all day: you want rousing, child."

"No, I don't," I said sadly. Was I not painfully roused already?

"Well, if you won't come, you won't, I suppose. Good-night; everybody must be here by this time, and I must go. I won't forget Tennyson."

She ran lightly along the passage with her trailing skirts sweeping after her, and I drew my chair up to the table. But the room was chilly, and I decided to go back to the schoolroom. It was not very far distant from my own room, and along the same passage. As I passed the nursery Miss Douglas came out of it, dressed in amber and white lace. Her dress was low, and her neck and arms were surrounded with amethysts. Her figure looked commanding, as I watched her also, along the passage which led to the front staircase.

I heard no sounds for some time after this,

except the faint murmur of the nurse's voice singing over her work. The drawing-room was too far off for the voices to be audible, even though the stillness in the schoolroom was almost oppressive. I wondered what they were doing downstairs, and whom Claude had taken in to dinner. Did he feel happy? and could he bestow any thoughts upon me while engaged with other people? Was Ethel talking to him, scandalising me and my family perhaps? The thought was insupportable, I could not bear it.

"I will go and take a turn in the garden," I said to myself, "and see if I can shake off this dreadful feeling; anything is better than such gloomy reflections." I rose to go, but Sarah, the nursery-maid, stopped my progress by knocking at the door with a volume of Tennyson in her hand.

"If you please, Miss, Miss Blantyre has sent you this book, with her love."

"Thank you," I replied, taking it from her,

and idly turning over the leaves. I did not care to read; I was heart-sick and restless. But anything was a change which could relieve my sad thoughts. I saw faint lines here and there, which marked occasional verses; lines, no doubt, made by Ethel's pencil. Here was one:

"Ask me no more: thy fate and mine are sealed.
I strove against the stream, and all in vain:
Let the great river take me to the main.
No more, dear love, for at a touch I yield.
Ask me no more."

To whom could she have alluded? Or was this only one of her idle fancies.

I turned the pages till I came to "Maud," which Ethel had so affected to despise. There was nothing therein, evidently, to take her fancy; yet, what was this marked with a double line, as if angrily, wrathfully inscribed?

"Sick, am I sick of a jealous dread?"

I curled my lip as I looked at it; this, doubt-

less, was marked upon the evening when, curled up on the drawing-room sofa, she had first made my acquaintance. I turned back a page, and drew my pencil down with a firm hand along these lines:

"What if with her sunny hair,
And smile as sunny as cold,
She meant to weave me a snare
Of some coquettish deceit."

And again:

"For a raven ever croaks at my side,
Keep watch and ward, keep watch and ward,
Or thou wilt prove their tool."

"How silly I am!" I exclaimed, throwing down the book; I will go and take a turn in the garden.

I slipped noiselessly down the back stairs, and out at the servants' entrance, without anyone observing me. The moon had risen, and a soft air blew my wavy hair over my forehead and fanned my burning cheeks. I walked through the kitchen garden to the flower garden beyond, which stretched out behind the

dining-room. A light fell upon it from the lamp which stood upon the table, and passing shadows were thrown across the grass plot in the middle. The blinds must, then, be drawn up, and I would creep round and see what they were doing. Following the path, I stole softly to the other side, and took up my station behind a thick laurel, not more than three yards from the window, and through which I could distinctly see the faces of the company. Ethel sat opposite to me, beside Captain Douglas, and next to Mr. Mortlock, the son of the Squire. At that moment she seemed to be talking quite gaily to him, as was her wont; while my friend, to all appearance, was sitting mute, too much engaged in the effort of dividing his sweetbread to take any notice of her.

I was glad of this, oh, so glad! My heart sick, sick of a jealous dread now, gave a quick rebound as I watched him. But his face was unusually grave, and even sad. Why was it?

Did he miss me, and long for my presence? Did Ethel's mocking laughter pall upon him?

I could not say. In another moment she had turned to him, and in her gay, bantering manner, appeared to address him. I could not tell what the words were, but I saw that they affected him somehow, for he bit his lip suddenly, and pushed his plate from in front of him, and then Ethel appeared to be penitent, bent her head, and spoke in a lower voice which I felt sure could only be heard by him. Through the window, open about the width of an inch, I could hear the murmur of the distant voices, but conversation, was, of course, lost to me. I became interested in watching them all. There was Mr. Lankester, the new member for the county, with his stout, good-natured wife; Sir Steele Cutler, who had taken Miss Douglas in to dinner; and Mr. and Mrs. Bolton of Wentworth. I knew them all by sight, but it was not at them that I cared to look when Claude was there, and sitting next

to her of whom I was sick of a jealous dread. Oh, Ethel, with your perfect face, how could you be so human?

I became very chilly as I stood in my laurel-bush, with the hair blowing across my face, and yet I could not tear myself away. I could see Ethel talking, and that was enough, talking in strains which caught his ear, and held him captive, and the sight of them riveted me to the spot. I watched them all through dinner and till the dessert was on the table; I saw him peel an orange for her, and I saw, whether by accident or design, that she lifted his wine-glass and sipped wine from it.

At last they rose, and the ladies filed out, Ethel coming last. As she reached the door she appeared to miss something, for which Claude went back. It proved to be her fan which she had dropped, and he picked it up for her. I saw him hand it to her, holding the door with one hand as he extended the other towards her. She smiled, and as she received

the fan from him, she pushed something into his hand. He stepped into the hall, for one moment following her, and then returned to the room. As he passed the window, he suddenly threw it wider open, and tossed something into the garden.

My heart stood still for one moment for fear I should be discovered, but the window was closed again directly, and he took his seat by the table. Groping my way behind the belt of shrubs which bounded the walk before the windows, I searched about for the object which I had seen thrown from Claude's hand, and soon discovered it. It proved to be a small piece of writing-paper crushed into a ball.

"Sick, am I sick of a jealous dread?"

How those words haunted me to-night: would they ever cease ringing through my brain?

"Now, Miss Ethel," I thought triumphantly, "I will see what you have said to my Claude."

I ran back rapidly to the house, the small piece of paper crushed in my hand, bounded up the back stairs, and to the deserted school-room. The fire had been made up in my absence, and my dinner remained untouched upon the table. I shivered with cold and nervousness, and, perhaps, with hunger also, for it was getting late; but I could taste nothing till I had found out some of Ethel's mysteries. I unfolded the paper and drew closer to the light; it was written in pencil in a hurried, illegible manner, but this much I managed to decipher:

"I have discovered the whole mystery. Pray, pray, do not be rash. I will tell you all to-morrow. Till then,

"Toujours votre amie,

"E. H. B."

I read this incoherent scrawl twice over, wondering, as I did so, to what did she allude? Had it anything to do with me? and if so, in what manner had Claude shown his rashness?

Or was it only some of her idle nonsense, connected with another set of people in whom I was uninterested? I remembered how many she and Claude must know, who were strangers to me, and the various subjects that they had in common with which I could have nothing to do. But still, my heart was "sick of a jealous dread," and the silence was dull and oppressive. I pushed away the tempting viands arranged on the snowy napkin, sick in body and mind; then flinging my little pellet of paper into the fire, I watched it burn with a fierce flickering flame, and then go out and vanish for ever from before my eyes. And then from the comfortable little chair which Mrs. Douglas, in her kindness, had given up to my use, I regarded the bright fire before me, and went over the events of another remarkable day. I had awoke with strong feelings of hope in the contemplation of his mother's arrival, and all my dreams of happiness were crushed by one fatal blow. What

was I to his mother? What could I ever be? Nothing more than a pale uninteresting girl in deep mourning, the instructress of her grandchildren.

Such were some of my gloomy thoughts, none the less gloomy because I despised myself for my own treachery. The temptation had been a strong one, but what right had I to read words that were intended for another person? Was I growing base and falsehearted also? I hoped not; but I was very, very weary. A low tap at my door, and to my answer, the face of Mrs. Burton, the housekeeper, with a kind smile almost unusual to her grim features.

"Why, Miss," she said as she entered the room, "where have you been? I have been searching for you everywhere, and at last I told Sarah to put your dinner down here to wait till you came back. I am afraid it is cold now."

"Thank you, Burton," I answered; "it was very kind of you, but I am not hungry. I

have a headache to-night, and don't want to eat."

"Dear, dear!" she exclaimed; "how white you look! Why, you haven't the least bit of colour in your cheeks, and you haven't touched your food after all! Eat this nice bit of trifle which I have brought up to you, Miss."

"No, thank you," I said, trying to smile, though I felt it was a ghastly attempt at a joke; "I am in no mood for trifles, Burton."

"What is it, my dear?" she said, sitting down beside me, and putting the plate on the table. "Is there any way I can help you?"

"Oh, Burton, you are very kind, very good," I answered gratefully; "but I don't think anyone can help me. Of course you must understand that I feel very depressed sometimes."

She looked touched, and I think she was.

"Poor dear!" she said; "is it because you are thinking of your mother?"

"Yes," I said softly. I longed to say more,

I longed to ask her whether she had heard the cruel reports spread about my father, and whether my mother's sudden death had become known to Ethel through her; but now that the time had come I could not; I could not frame the words which were so near my heart but so far from my lips. How could I suggest the supposition?

"I think you would feel better if you had a glass of wine," said Burton after a little pause; "you look worn-out, and have been thinking too much about things, maybe. Don't fret yourself, Miss; things are never any better for fretting. There, I'll go and get you some wine, and a nice little sandwich, and I'm sure you will feel the good of it." She got up and opened the door. "They are singing downstairs," she added; "I'll leave the door open for you to listen."

The deep, rich voice of a man was heard singing a song which I knew too well. The sounds rang through the house, down the

passage, and fell on my straining sensitive ear, upon my heart, and on my brain, till my whole being was stirred by it—the song of "Adelaide."

I leaned my head upon the table, longing yet dreading it to cease; fearful of losing one single note, yet thrilled through and through with a painful pleasure which was almost agony How well I can describe those feelings now! How they come back to me as I write, the restless, craving pain gnawing within me, begotten of mingled love and jealousy.

It ceased at last, and then another voice arose upon the silence—Ethel's voice, singing her "Merry Zingara." How well I could see her; the turn of her head, the coquettish look in her eyes. Then a long piece of music played by some powerful master-hand, Sir Steele Cutler's probably; then Claude's voice again, in a duet with a rich female voice, which I rightly conjectured to be his sister's.

It was growing late now. I had eaten my

sandwiches, drunk my wine, and felt all the better for them. The hall-clock chimed out eleven, the guests had departed, the family appeared to be separating for the night. I heard Ethel's voice singing up the stairs the refrain of the last song she had heard, I heard good-nights exchanged upon the front landing, and still I sat before my fire, which was burning slowly, slowly away. Half-past eleven. The house was silent now; the lamp was burning low. I must go to bed; I should be ill if I sat up much longer. And yet I was so painfully wide awake that no thought of sleep could come to me. I rose at length, and stepped out into the passage. It was in darkness. Burton had put out the light, and I must get another before I could go to my own room. I groped along, leaving the glow of the lamp to shine from the open door, and serve as a beacon to my return; then lighting my candles on the table in my room, I crept softly back again.

Someone was standing within the school-room; the lamp was low, almost out; another minute and there would be no need for me to extinguish it. Before that minute was passed, however, before I could step across the threshold, I felt two strong arms round me, clasping me tightly, while kisses were pressed upon my brow, my head, my face. It is unnecessary for me to say who it was; you can tell as well as I.

Once again the loving trust had come back which made my world a paradise; once again my jealous dread had faded, my fear of Ethel departed. I only knew that he loved me, and that I—could words express my love? But the reaction was too great; I had gone through so many hopes and fears, such alternate love, jealousy, mistrust, and dread; I was altogether so miserable from my other trials, so weak in body as well as in mind, that my feeble nature could not stand the sudden shock. I burst into hysterical sobs as I suffered myself to

lean upon him, to give myself up to the bliss of that moment.

No word was spoken between us. Sufficient for me to know that his love was mine; sufficient, perhaps, for him to know that I knew it also. The lamp went out, leaving us in total darkness. I drew myself away without speaking, and, turning from him, flew down the passage to where the light from the open door revealed my own bedroom. All the misery of the day was forgotten in this blissful security, and as I threw myself upon my knees beside my little bed, I tearfully thanked God for His great mercies to me.

END OF VOL. II.

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